

THE TWIN KINGDOMS

THE
ROSE AND THE
CLAW

NANCY O'TOOLE

Nancy O'Toole

The Rose and the Claw

First published by Midnight Tide Publishing 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Nancy O'Toole

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

Find out more at reedsy.com



Contents

[1. The Rosebush](#)

[2. The Lantern](#)

[3. The Captive](#)

[4. The Caretaker](#)

[5. The Letters](#)

[6. The Garden](#)

[7. The Stain](#)

[8. The Spy](#)

[9. The Library](#)

[10. The Glass House](#)

[11. The Mother's Moon](#)

[12. The Beast](#)

[13. The Grove](#)

[14. The Fallen](#)

[15. The Visitor](#)

[16. The Butcher](#)

[17. The Manor](#)

[18. The Grave](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[A Dance with Magic](#)

[Also by Nancy O'Toole](#)

[More by Midnight Tide Publishing](#)

1

The Rosebush

Kris

I had landed on the rosebush again, the prick of the thorns digging into the thick layer of fur that coated my skin. Not that I could move. Every small shift brought a fresh wave of agony. My claw-shaped wounds opened and bled, staining the cobblestone path that led to the front door of Rosewood Manor.

I opened my eyes to find the cold, clear light of dawn—faint as it was—was too much for me. I winced, aware that this would be my reality for the next day or so. It was always like this after the full moon. The pain, the harsh light of morning was too much for my beastly eyes, and the coat of blood on my claws and muzzle was sickening.

I paused at the voices carried over by the wind. So many people, and so near. With my sensitive ears, I should have been able to detect them long before they had managed to get this close. I raised my head, doing my best to ignore the wave of dizziness that followed. My vision cleared just in time for me to make out the glow of torches illuminating angry male faces.

It was impossible not to recognize the person in the front. He possessed the trademark Kelvian coloring: light skin, hair, and eyes, and a large and muscular frame despite having passed into middle age. He stood a good few inches above the tallest man in the group, but I knew that if I were to stand on my back claws, my stooped form would tower over the village headmen. It was the main reason why Headman Garrick and his men only set foot on Rosewood Manor's grounds once a month, the day after the full moon, when I would be weakest.

But it wasn't the only reason.

The headman and his followers came to a stop a good ten paces away. It was just close enough to make out the look between Garrick and the man standing directly to his left. It was clear, from his thin hair and rounded middle, that the years had been less kind to this one. But it was not his physical prowess that drew my attention, but his hands, clenched into fists. His breath momentarily puffed into a cloud of frozen vapor before he stepped forward.

As he approached, his gaze slid, for just a second, to me, lying next to the entryway in a pool of blood, before pushing open the front door of Rosewood Manor and stepping inside. For a few minutes, the only sound was the shorter man's retreating footsteps and the breathing of his companions.

Footsteps filled the air again, these ones fast and uneven. Seconds later, the shorter man burst from the front door of the manor. Eyes filled with cold fury, he charged at me, aiming a swift kick at my side. Then another. And another. Blind with rage, there was no aim to his blows, but such precision was unnecessary, given the extent of my injuries. Half paralyzed by pain, I curled around my middle, hoping against all hope that the Divine Father would choose mercy. That he would plunge me into unconsciousness before something was broken.

But instead...

"David! David!" The headman's voice cut through the air, followed by the scrape of heels against cobblestones as the shorter man was dragged away.

"Let me kill him, headman," the man—David?—growled.

"Hush," Garrick replied, voice firm. "I understand the pain you are going through. But we made a deal, and as men of honor, we must stand by it."

With those words, David went very still.

"Men of honor?" he replied. "Is that what we are?"

"David."

"Cowards! That's all we are now." He hollered to the crowd "Which one of *you* is willing to give up a daughter?"

As he spoke, he jerked toward Garrick, the men at his side still holding him back. And for a second, I could have sworn that Garrick's gaze dropped, as if in shame.

"No," the headman said, his voice barely above a whisper. "No more daughters."

I jerked slightly as a howl cut through from the back of the crowd. No, not a howl but the voice of a woman using some rather...colorful language. But it wasn't the language or even the volume that

struck me. No, it was the distinct drawl that marked her voice, an accent I hadn't experienced in years.

The woman was pushed forward, stumbling over the cobblestones before falling to the ground. I cringed as her palms slapped the stones. But to her credit, she did not cry out in pain, merely mumbled a muffled "damn" and pushed herself to her feet, her gaze darkening as her eyes met Garrick.

"What the *hell* is going on here, headman?" she asked.

"Madam Gardner," Garrick began.

"Oh, don't you 'Madam Gardner' me." The woman stepped toward the large man, sticking one of her fingers right in the center of his face. "I know we have our differences, but you can't just drag a woman out of her bed before dawn and expect her to be..."

All it took to silence her was one look. And who could blame her? My physical form was shocking enough. The fact that I was covered in blood was almost secondary.

Her gaze lingered on me for several seconds, giving me a moment to get a good look at her. Had her accent not already given it away, her appearance would have betrayed her Verdian blood. Unlike the light-colored hair that could be found on the rest of the villagers, her curling locks, which rain fell a couple of inches past her shoulders, were a deep brown. Her skin had a touch more color, a result of being raised in a country with enough year-round sunlight to leave behind a natural tan. Her eyes were green, though, not the expected brown. But that wasn't too surprising. Verdians and Kelvians had common ancestors, after all.

She was also undeniably beautiful, even though her appearance flew in the face of the classic Kelvian beauty. Her facial features were strong instead of delicate, her body made up of sloping curves instead of being slight. She was on the tall side for a woman, not that it was obvious standing next to Garrick. She was also, I could not help but notice, twice the age that Susannah had been.

Because that's what she was here for, of course. To become the new caretaker. I felt an ache fill my chest. *Poor Susannah...*

"What is this?" The woman asked, turning back to the village headman. "A wounded animal—"

"Not an animal," Garrick replied, voice solemn.

"Not a...what are you *talking* about?"

"The man-beast lives here." He gestured at the building. "Rosewood Manor."

"I don't see what that has to do with me—"

"And *you*," Garrick continued as if she had never spoken, "are looking for a place to stay."

The woman blinked before gazing up at Rosewood Manor, a once beautiful home, now falling to ruin. I watched as her eyes darkened.

“When I told you that, I meant the stinking inn!”

“Then this should be more than sufficient.”

“It looks *cursed!*”

“That’s because it is.”

She drew back visibly and shook her head. “I’m not agreeing to this. Excuse—”

Garrick’s large hand latched itself around the woman’s fleshy arm as she began to turn away.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked, voice low.

“The road, of course. I’m *leaving* Farrow.”

“How far do you think you’ll get on your own? It’s several days’ walk to the nearest town—and through the wilderness, no less.”

“I’m sorry, were you under the impression that I was helpless?”

“Far from it. But it’s quite a journey to get to the main road, with so many terrible things that might happen to you on the way.”

Garrick’s gaze slid to the men next to him. His voice was now as low as a growl, and I, in my half-dazed state, felt the urge to growl back.

“You...you’d *stop* me from leaving,” the woman said.

“Of course.”

“But you’ve been trying to get rid of me from the moment I first got here! You can’t do—”

“I am the village headman, Madam. Of course, I can do that.”

“Someone will—”

“What? Protest? Protect you? A Verdian woman. Did you honestly think that would work? Listen.”

He placed both of his hands on her shoulders. “You need a place to say. We are providing that for you. Your choice is a simple one, Rose Gardner.”

“This is unnecessary.”

At the sound of my voice, hoarse as it was, every soul tensed up as if expecting me to spring. All except for the woman, who turned toward me, her gaze wary.

“Did that just...speak?” she asked, narrowing those green eyes of hers.

Such lovely eyes.

“I do not require another caretaker,” I said, doing my best to keep the pain from my voice. “Do not try to force her—”

“We made a promise,” Headman Garrick said, speaking over me before turning back to the woman. “And now you’re a part of it.”

She looked up at the house again, before dropping her gaze down to me. I watched as she frowned and slowly, cautiously, began to make her way forward, her gaze not leaving mine for a second. Her feet barely made noise as they touched the ground. She was wearing slippers, I couldn’t help but notice, along with a dressing gown. Not enough to protect her from the chill, as evidenced by the gooseflesh on her bare arms.

Of course, that could be equally due to fear.

It wasn’t until she was a couple of paces away that I realized what she was doing. Or, at least, not doing. Stopping. No, her speed was cautious, her gaze wary, but she continued to approach.

Not Rosewood Manor, but *me*.

Drawing close, she dropped down to one knee and extended a single hand, which she rested on the side of my face. The softness of her skin hit me as sharply as the thorns beneath me and I felt my breath catch. Her eyes widened as she met mine.

“A simple choice,” she muttered beneath her breath. “No, this is no choice at all.” She raised her voice before speaking again. “Fine, Garrick. I’ll be your caretaker.”

With one swift movement, she came to her feet and demanded to be returned to her inn so she could “get her things and at least *change*, for cycle’s sake!” Not that I could concentrate on that. Instead, I felt myself being pulled back into my own sorrows as this Madam Gardner’s path became written in stone.

Life, the prophets said, was designed in an interlocking series of cycles. Day to night. Winter to spring. Peace to war. Life to death. All cycling back on themselves in one inescapable loop.

It did not matter that she was different. That she was older, or Verdian, or clearly very brave. Rose Gardner would follow the same predetermined path.

A path that ended in an early, painful death.

2

The Lantern

Rose

I tried to slip out the window when Garrick's men weren't looking. Didn't think it would work, but you can't blame a gal for trying. I had seen the marks on that creature, after all. Big ones, unlike any bear, or cougar I'd encountered in my thirty-one years. I thought I had prepared myself for anything when I had decided to travel to Kelvia. Seasickness, brigands on the roads, even prejudice. Not monsters out of fairy tales.

Dammit, Rose, what have you gotten yourself into now?

My legs dangled off the edge of the cart, and the sound of the draft horse's slow, steady hoofbeats filled my ears as the village of Farrow faded in the distance. The trees above me seemed almost supernatural in their ability to filter out the sun, given that their branches were still half bare. At least the place had warmed up some, so my dress and long cloak were enough to keep me comfortable for once.

Stinking Kelvian winters. If I were home in Verdia, we would have been well into spring by now. The last scraps of snow a distant memory, my tomatoes already planted, and the world a crisp, fresh green. Kelvia's seasons seemed to be at least a full month behind. But what could you expect in a land that never seemed to get any real sun?

Maybe it was why the people were so damn rude.

I wrapped my fingers around the musket that lay across my lap, moving from the cool metal of the barrel to the wooden stock. I felt a shiver run through me as my fingertips traced over the imprint of the former owner's hand.

So much trouble for one little musket.

Not that I should be surprised. I followed the teaching of the Divine Pair, even though I was more a woman of the ways than of the words. I knew damn well that life came in cycles. And at the end of the day, a gun was nothing more than a tool made for pain and destruction. There was only so long it could be something else before cycling back to what it was made to do.

The cart beneath me jerked to a halt, jolting me from my bitter thoughts. Looks like we had made it. I let out a sigh before swinging the unloaded gun over my shoulder, then jumped from the back of the cart. In addition to the musket, I had brought two bags with me, a smaller one I could carry against my hip, and a larger duffle that held clothing, food, and other junk. After picking up the smaller bag, I turned to the duffle, finding myself faced with the same dilemma I had been plagued with since first setting foot on Kelvia.

How the hell was I supposed to carry all this?

A hand reached down and hauled up the bigger bag. I blinked, looking up in surprise to see that kid who had been silently driving the cart for the past twenty minutes. He was a young thing, probably about ten, and the sort of skinny that did not suit a growing boy.

Perhaps...

Could he be untouched by the hatred that consumed the rest of this blasted nation? I felt a warm feeling settle into my chest, a feeling that I hadn't experienced since first setting foot into Farrow. Hope for a happier future between our two countries.

Then he hauled my bag over the side of the cart and threw it into the mud, and that warm, hopeful feeling transformed into hot rage.

"Damn you, boy!" I roared. "There are preserves in there. My *famous* strawberry preserves. If one of those breaks and ends up all over my clothes...boy? Don't you go leaving without a word!"

He flinched at my anger and immediately urged the workhorses to a faster gait. I felt myself deflate a bit. He may have been a brat, but what choice did he have, growing up in a place like this? My anger was quickly replaced with a wash of guilt.

Unfortunately, that only lasted until the child opened his mouth, murmuring two now-familiar words beneath his breath.

"Verdian whore."

Well! The little bastard was lucky this gun wasn't loaded. Martin probably wouldn't have appreciated me murdering one of his countrymen, especially one that wasn't even *technically* a man yet. Instead, I made a rude gesture toward his retreating back.

"Rose, Rose," my pa's words came back to me. "You have all of the beauty of your namesake, with none of its sweetness."

"If you wanted a sweet daughter, then you shouldn't have named me after something with thorns."

I reached down for my duffle and threw it over the same shoulder as the musket before turning to the entrance of Rosewood Manor.

Under different circumstances, I may have found myself impressed at the size of the thing. What can I say? I'm a simple countrywoman. It's pretty much my job to gawp at large structures—you should have seen my first reaction to the ship that brought me over. But even with my limited knowledge of big buildings, I knew one thing for sure.

This one was a *dump*.

Leave it to Kelvians to create something beautiful then let it go to rot. The stone entryway leaned so far to the right that one strong wind or a particularly hefty raccoon could have sent it tumbling over. It was covered in twisted greenery, as was the entire left side of the house, the invasive ivy taking over the place just like nature designed. The closer I got, the more I could make out the peeling paint and shattered wood that marked the drawn shutters and the front door. Unlike this morning, that was shut tight.

Also, unlike this morning, there was no half-dead creature welcoming me like a bruised-up butler. Instead, a large stain of blood decorated the cobblestones.

Fear, as cold as an ice bath, damped down any remaining anger. Where had the creature gone? And what could have taken down such a massive beast to begin with? I had seen its injuries. Those massive claw marks. The pain in his eyes...

If the villagers' reactions meant anything, whatever it is was had been more than enough for the previous caretaker.

Straightening my shoulders, I approached the front door, adjusting the strap of the duffle to keep it from sliding off my shoulder. Finding a heavy iron knocker, I reached out and let it drop. I jumped. Shoot! That had made more noise than any knocker had any right to.

But for all its thunder, I received no response.

After trying once more, I let out a sigh and reached for the doorknob, decorated with metal roses. Ma would be ashamed to see me barging into a strange house unannounced. Even if I was supposed to be its "caretaker." Whatever that meant.

It opened without much resistance, leading me into the dark.

The inside of Rosewood Manor was so grim that even the pale light of morning cut through it like a knife, revealing a high-ceilinged front hall. A grand staircase began a few paces in front of me, heading upward before forking both left and right. Signs of past opulence littered the place like dry leaves. The wooden banister was decorated with delicate twisting roses. The chandelier above my head was more cobwebs than gilt. Peeling paintings of the Mother and the Father covered much of the ceiling. The few pieces of furniture that stood around me were covered in ghost-like white sheets.

I had entered a house of the dead.

With a sigh, I slipped my duffle to the floor, not looking to lug the thing throughout the whole house if I didn't need to. It fell next to, of all things, a lantern made of silver and glass.

"Well, that's fortunate, at least."

I reached down for it and checked its base. Not a ton of oil inside, but enough to let me get my bearings. The lantern had weight and was clearly designed to be held aloft with one hand. The musket needed both at the ready to fire. This left me with a bit of a conundrum. Should I bring protection or light?

"You can't shoot what you can't see." The tiny voice in my head sounded suspiciously like Martin's. Meaning I should probably take the advice to heart.

The lantern lit, and musket tucked over one shoulder, I headed deeper into the house. After finding the first two doors locked, I turned to the stairs, feeling like I was being herded like livestock.

I was met with a wall of pictures. Portraits, really, given their not-so-insignificant level of fanciness. There were only four of them, but boy, they were big. The middle two were a man and a woman just covered in jewels. Surprised the artist hadn't gone blind due to all the reflected light.

The children, whose portraits hung on either side, were less weighed down. One was a little girl of about eight years old, with white-blond hair, fair skin, and blue eyes—traditional Kelvian coloring. The boy was a little older, already in his teens, with reddish-blond curls and a haughty expression.

A low, exaggerated creak echoed to my left. I spun toward it, raising the lantern high to reveal a door, swinging open. But what could have moved it? This place was buttoned up tight. The wind couldn't get in.

Unless it wasn't a what but a *who*.

Feeling all kinds of stupid, I took a step forward, my curiosity beating out my sense of self-preservation. I ended up in a long hallway filled with more doors. I heard another creak, this one directly to my left, and turned toward it in time to see another door open.

Oh, I was *definitely* being herded. Shooting blindly into the dark was beginning to sound like the right call.

From where I stood, I had a full view of the room, a bedroom. The lantern was bright enough to show off a sizable wardrobe, a small table with a porcelain pitcher and basin, a large four-poster bed covered in rumpled sheets....

And a pair of shining red eyes.

3

The Captive

Rose

I fell backward, landing awkwardly on one knee. Slamming the lantern down, I reached up over my shoulder and pulled out the musket. The butt of the gun rested against my shoulder, the trigger beneath my finger. I pointed the barrel straight toward where I had last seen those glowing eyes, only to be met with darkness.

The thing wasn't loaded, but he didn't know that.

"I...apologize," a deep but soft voice called out. "It was not my intention to scare you."

"Do I look scared?" I snapped, more than a hint of a growl in my own steady voice.

"At this moment? Not particularly," the creature responded with...was that amusement? I felt my temper rise. This fool better not be mocking me.

Not that I was dumb enough to try and challenge a creature of that size. Even injured as he was, it was safe to assume that he was more than capable of taking out little ole me.

Only when he had spoken up before, it had been in my defense. The question was, why?

"Granted, if you wanted to harm me, the lantern would be a more successful method."

I paused, my gaze slipping down to where the lantern lay by my left knee.

"Why is that now?" I asked.

"My eyes are normally sensitive to the light," he replied, "but on days like today, even small levels of illumination are enough to cause physical pain."

"Why are you telling me this?" I stepped forward. "Are you lying?"

"Given that I rarely have the opportunity to speak the truth in full, I prefer to take advantage when it presents itself to me," he said crisply. Before I could ponder over what *that* little statement meant,

he continued. “What is a Verdian woman doing in the village of Farrow?”

I tightened my grip on the musket. “Returning a soldier’s arms to his birthplace.”

Apparently, I was feeling honest myself.

“Ah,” the creature replied. “An old and respected tradition of the Divine Father.” He paused. “Yet, you still carry it, even though Headman Garrick implied that you have been in Farrow for close to a week?”

“What can I say. Not everyone considers the tradition old and respected.”

At least coming from a Verdian interloper. It was hard not to think back on the sight of Martin’s ma, and the way her eyes had focused on me. Pale blue eyes just like my Martin’s had been. Only while his had always been filled with warmth, her gaze had been as cold as the frost on her front lawn.

“He was a man of the way, and the words,” I had said, pressing the gun forward. “His arms need to be carried to the place of his birth for his soul to rest in peace. You know he would have wanted this.”

“My son stopped caring about what I wanted years ago,” Martin’s ma had replied. “Why should I be bothered?”

Shoot. I felt tears prickle in the corner of my eyes at the memory. I shook them off, pushing myself to my feet while doing my best to keep the barrel of the firearm pointed to where I last saw the creature. Not that he would have any trouble finding me, thanks to the lantern.

Although given what he had said about being sensitive to light...

“I don’t understand what’s going on here,” I said, unable to keep the emotions from creeping into my voice. “The v-villagers, they told me something about a pact and how I’m supposed to be a caretaker, but for all their words, they didn’t explain shit.”

The creature paused. It might have been the profanity. Kelvians didn’t expect it, especially from women, who were supposed to be silent and obedient. When he spoke next, his voice was surprisingly apologetic.

“It was unfair of Garrick to pull you, an outsider, into Farrow’s dark deals. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about Rosewood Manor, but there is something that you must know first.

“This place is enchanted. Cursed may be a more suitable choice of phrase. As a result, the manor...restricts my speech. There are topics I may not cover. Situations that I cannot explain in full,

and questions that I, regardless of my own desires, am not able to answer for you. But just because I cannot answer those questions doesn't mean that you shouldn't ask them. Does that make sense?"

No, my brain automatically supplied. On the outside, I said, "Yes."

"I am glad to hear that," the creature said. "You mentioned a pact?"

"That the villagers made," I said, taking a step forward. "Involving a caretaker."

"A little over a year ago, men from the capital approached Headman Garrick with hopes of cutting a deal. The village of Farrow would no longer need to provide the war effort with the typical required quota of men. In return, they would send a caretaker to keep an eye on the nearby Rosewood Manor and its...inhabitant."

"You mean you." I blinked. I had thought that there was an unusual amount of men milling about in Farrow, especially compared to the coast, where trousers had been vastly outnumbered by skirts.

"Correct. Now, because the manor is so enchanted, it will take care of our needs. Food will always be found in the kitchen cabinets. Clean clothing in its wardrobes, and enough lumber in the woodshed to stave off even winter's harshest sting."

"Well, that sounds great and all, but then what's the purpose of a caretaker? It's not like one person can keep this place up."

In response, the creature shifted, moving forward and into the light, displaying his long, wicked-looking claws. I couldn't help it, I took a step back, tightening my grip on the musket. Was halfway toward yelling at him to "back off!" before I realized what he was doing.

"They may look impressive but are somewhat lacking in the dexterity required of even simple everyday tasks," he said, with a hint of shame. "That, and it is desired for someone to stay and keep an eye on me, given that I cannot leave."

"So, what? You're a prisoner?"

"I...yes. I supposed it's right to say that."

"Then what are you in for? What did you do?"

For five long seconds, I was met with nothing but silence.

"I apologize, Madam Gardner," the creature said, pulling back his claws. "But that is one of the things the manor will not let me explain."

"Well, how about this." I raised my chin. "What killed the previous caretaker?"

"That"—the creature paused—"is a question you should certainly be asking. I swear if there is one question I could answer, it would be that one."

"Well, yeah, it's kinda important. Was she taken out by whatever scratched you up? What the hell is going on here?"

"Hell. Now that is an appropriate descriptor. Rosewood Manor, for all that it appears benign, is a house of demons. I would not look down on you if you were to choose to leave."

"That's assuming I have a choice."

An awkward silence settled between the two of us.

"I apologize for my rudeness," the creature continued, a hint of pain in his voice. "But I must take some time to tend to these injuries."

"Do you need help?" I found myself saying. "I have bandages."

Awful strange question to ask someone you were pointing a gun at.

"You are kind," the beast replied. "But the magic of the manor is enough to take care of injuries on this level."

I shook my head before speaking. "You lost me there. If the manor is so hellish, then why is it helping you?"

"The magic of this manor, the fact that I have been its inhabitant for so long...it has linked us in a way. And the manor always protects its people."

"Well then," I said, pausing to swallow, throat suddenly dry. "I'll just leave you to it."

With that, I slowly lowered the musket, an act that left me feeling exposed. I crouched down to pick up the lantern and began to back out toward the door.

"Madam Gardner," the creature said, causing me to pause. "I don't think I have done a sufficient job expressing this, but I am sorry that you have been dragged into everything."

"Don't call me that," I said.

"Hmmm?"

"You Kelvians are so damn formal. Madam this. Madam that. Makes me feel so damn old. Just call me Rose. I've had that name for quite a bit longer, after all."

"As you wish...Rose," the creature said awkwardly.

A silence settled between the two of us.

"This is the point where you tell me *your* name," I prompted.

"Ah...what?"

"Well, I can't exactly go around calling you 'man-beast.' Doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. Come on, what's your name?"

There was another long pause. So long that I began to think that this was one of the “questions the manor would not let him answer.” Then, he spoke again.

“Kris. My name is Kris.”

4

The Caretaker

Kris

The door shut behind her, plunging the room into shadow. I braced myself, waiting for the pain to lessen now that the lantern's light no longer assaulted me. Instead, it remained imprinted on the back of my eyelids, as if its glowing presence had never left the room.

I wondered how long my punishment would linger this time.

"As long as you deserve it," replied a singsong voice.

I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing the face that would be attached to it. Knowing what would happen if I turned my head and looked in the right direction.

So, of course, I did it.

She perched on the edge of the bed, her dark-blond hair appearing brown in the low light of the room. She wore her dressing gown, just like the moment she had died. All that was missing...

She turned to face me head-on, revealing the long slash that adorned the entire length of her neck. She was not bleeding. Spirits, for the most part, do not. Their focus seems to be more about the pain rather than the fluids that follow.

"What? Miss me?" Her lips twisted into a smile.

Miss her? I had barely known her. Susannah Dawes had spent her days barricaded in her rooms, fearing the hideous beast she was forced to reside with. For her entire year-long tenure as caretaker of Rosewood Manor, I don't think we had carried out a single conversation.

"Miss Dawes," I croaked out, my throat suddenly dry. "I cannot express how sorry I am for your current—"

"My current state?" She finished. "Really, Kris? What a way to dismiss such a violent end."

“N-no,” I said. “I don’t—”

And then she was suddenly next to me, moving so fast it was almost as if she had vanished and reappeared, less than a foot away from my repulsive face. I balked, unable to control my reaction.

“Chasing me on all fours like the *animal* you are,” she said. “Snarling, howling. Just like a monster—”

“I’m s-sorry,” I began.

“I suppose it’s no big deal for you in the long run.” She rocked back on her heels. “Blood on the floor, gore on the walls. Eventually, the manor will consume every drop.”

She paused to examine her right arm, peppered with long scratches. I watched as the anger faded from her eyes, replaced by confusion and fear.

The dead were often angry and cruel, rarely resembling the person they had been in life. It was appropriate. Spirits were an unnatural perversion of the cycle of life and death. When a person died, their soul was meant to cycle back to the Father. It was why people like Madam Gardner traveled hundreds of miles. By carrying her husband’s arms back to the place of his birth, she could guide his soul to his final resting place, where his life began. The alternative was damning him to countless years of hell as his spirit wandered the earth.

“You’re thinking about her, aren’t you?” Susannah said. “Your next victim.”

I dropped my gaze. Her form didn’t precisely *glow* as the lantern had, but she did stand out, appearing as if she had been cut out from another time and placed into my darkened room.

Madam Gardner, on the other hand...

I thought back to how she had stood there, her light-gray dress illuminated by the lamplight. The look of determination on her face as she stared down the barrel of that musket. The strength in her voice...

“So predictable,” Susannah said, taking my expression as a response to her question. “No time to mourn dear, dead Susannah. The girl who spent a full year trembling like a scared rodent.” She turned to look at me. “But since we’re so eager to move on, let’s have a discussion. What do you make of the new caretaker?”

“Make of her? We’ve only met once.”

“Not entirely true.”

I frowned. Of course, there had been our first encounter, outdoors at dawn, but that had been so brief. Still, there had been something about her eyes as her fingers had brushed against the fur of my face...

“I don’t like her.” Susannah crossed her arms. She glided across the room and to the window, shuttered tight. “She’s the enemy, Kris. You of all people should know that.”

That I should. Only it was one thing to see them as a shadowy other, a mass of soldiers from far across the sea. But to come face to face with a living, breathing, *angry* Kelvian woman...

“She was...kind to me,” I said with a swallow. “When she first saw me outside. There was sympathy in her eyes.”

“She saw you as a wounded animal,” Susannah snapped. “A mute creature, half torn to pieces and left outside for the buzzards. She doesn’t know you or what you’ve done. That you’re weak—”

Weak. The one word seemed to echo around the room. *Weak-weak-weak.* It’s every iteration gaining in volume, transforming from Susannah’s high tones, deepening, changing until—

“*Weak fool. Barely worth the space you take up.*”

I jerked at the familiar voice, spoken so close, so clearly. Had it just been in my head, or was he here now? A spirit more terrifying than any teenaged girl—

My thoughts were cut off by the muffled sound of voices outside. I frowned, and pushed myself to my feet, even though my body ached in protest. I gritted my teeth against it. It wasn’t comfortable, but it was apparent that the manor’s magic had begun stitching me back together. With a day’s rest, I would be well enough to move without much pain.

I walked over to the window, a process that got me uncomfortably close to my previous caretaker. And then, knowing I would regret it, I peered through the shutters, squinting against the daylight.

Mr. Garrick, the village headman, stood just beyond the property line, speaking with one of his men in low tones. Because of the distance, I could make out his voice, but not understand specific words, even with my sensitive ears. He was clearly giving instructions of sorts. I watched as his man nodded and turned away, heading to the right side of the house, his steps purposeful.

Then Garrick looked up and in our direction. And while I knew he couldn’t see us among the dark, for a moment, I swore his eyes hit mine. I turned away.

“She’s not here to help you, you know,” Susannah said. “She’s here against her will, just like me. And will end up just like me. Forgotten, and torn to pieces.”

I felt a sharp pain pierce my chest. I reached up and pressed a long claw against the wound, accidentally tearing my shirt in the process. It looked like I wasn’t as healed up as I had thought.

“No,” I said, turning back to the girl. “Susannah, I am sorry for all that you have gone through and hope that your spirit returns to the Father the moment your family places your remains to rest. But

know this—I will do *everything* within my power to prevent something like this from ever happening again.”

She leaned back with a sniff. “Pretty words, but cheap. The manor will prevent you from warning her of what’s to come.”

“I will find a way around its restraints—”

“And besides, you don’t want her to leave.”

I backed away from her as if she had slapped me. “What?”

“I can see the way you react to her. You like her, find her *pleasant company*, a balm for all your years of isolated loneliness. After all, she clearly feels sorry for you. Sees you as a prisoner, not the monster you are. Even if the manor didn’t restrict you, even if Garrick wasn’t forcing her to stay, you’d find a way to keep her here.”

Before I could reply, she vanished into thin air, leaving me completely alone.

No. I shook my head. Susannah was wrong. I had to figure out a way to get this new caretaker, this Rose Gardner, away from this place.

Regardless of how that touch of her hand had made me feel.

5

The Letters

Rose

I headed straight to the front door.

It was cruel, I know. To take one look at that poor injured creature and turn tail? But there were too many holes in his story. And whether those holes were intentional, or due to the “enchantment of the manor”—whatever that meant—it didn’t matter. I didn’t know the whole truth. Who were those “men from the capital?” Why keep him captive? Why not just kill him? Judging from his wounds, someone had certainly tried.

And could do the same to me.

As I reached the front hall, I picked up my duffle next to the front door. I reached for the knob and found that it didn’t budge quite as easily as the first time. No bother. An extra yank was all it took to open the door and let the daylight in.

And then I caught sight of him, a tall man with a musket that looked a hell of a lot like the one I carried. He lingered near the stone gate, and as he walked past, he turned his head toward me. Our gazes met for three long seconds.

I found myself wishing that a freak wind would knock down that stinking archway and squish him flat.

Well, then. Fine. Big places like this had back doors, right? And there was only so much house one guard could cover.

Then I saw the second one to the south circling around to the back of the building. And he wasn’t alone.

I slammed the door so hard that the chandelier above me shook.

“S-shoot.” I curled my right hand into a fist and pounded it against its solid wooden frame.

“Verdian whore,” that boy had called me. “War widow,” the villagers had said, their lips curled up in sneers.

I should have seen it coming. Pa had warned me, after all.

“What kind of treatment do you think you’ll receive from these people? We’re practically still at war. You’re a woman on your own. They’ll treat you lower than dirt.”

And dammit, he had been right. The moment I had stepped on shore, the second every man had caught sight of my dark hair, the drawl of my accent, I had seen how their eyes had narrowed. How the women had turned their faces away. It was a miracle I hadn’t spent my first night out on the street.

But the next day, I had found a new miracle in the form of a troop of Hajanni traders, who had allowed me to join up with them as they made their way north. Had it not been for their wares, I’m pretty sure that the narrow-minded Kelvians we came across would have treated them with the same level of disrespect. Of course, it would have been purely for the color of their skin and the language they spoke, rather than any sordid history.

Granted, I had found their accents and clothing intimidating at first, making me a stinking hypocrite. But before long, the only thing about them I found ridiculous was the price they charged to escort me to Farrow.

Throughout the journey, the caravan had treated me with nothing but respect. The women welcomed me with open arms, drawing me in with their good cooking, and keeping me with their kindness. Their leader, Amar, had even formed a liking for my preserves. He had offered to escort me to the coast if I was still in Farrow when they cycled back.

I had laughed at him. By then, I would be long gone from Martin’s hometown and heading to West Ridge, my village in Verdia.

I had been such a fool.

I didn’t check every one of the rooms. Luxury, it turned out, was as dull as anything else after you saw enough of it. There were more bedrooms than the biggest families in West Ridge could fill. On top of that, there were plenty of spaces dedicated to just sitting around and doing nothing.

Clearly, the lives of landowners were stressful. Who could keep track of so many rooms?

The more delicate items in the house seemed to have been hidden away or outright removed. Most of the books were gone from the library shelves. The furniture was tucked beneath white sheets, every bed (besides Kris’s, of course) stripped of its bedding, and the carpets rolled up and taken away. I

did find a piano, though, which sounded awful nice, even if my fingers didn't know to turn the notes into music.

Eventually, I moved into the west wing of the house and felt my shoulders relax a fraction. This was clearly where the servants had lived, and the simple furnishing suited me a lot better than all that sheet-covered finery. The rooms were just as stripped, but eventually, I found signs of life.

On the most western corner of the house was a small room with a quilt-covered bed, and an open wardrobe that held a few homespun dresses.

A chill ran through me as I stepped inside. Sure, the rest of this house felt every bit as haunted, but this room was almost worse.

This is where the previous caretaker had lived.

I ran my fingers over the dresses in the wardrobe, and the quilt on the bed, finding the fabrics soft. I caught sight of a small bag, similar to the one I carried, wedged between the wardrobe and the wall. Stepping forward, I picked it up gently before taking a seat on the twin bed.

The mattress creaked beneath me, and I opened the bag to see, of all things, a stuffed toy rabbit made of soft, white fabric with big, floppy ears and pink x's for eyes.

"Cycles! How old were you?" I asked.

Beneath the rabbit was a wooden box filled with a dozen hair ribbons, a cheap tin locket, and a heart-shaped ring that appeared to be made of real silver. Beyond that, the rest of the bag was filled with letters. Dozens of letters neatly tied together in packets with twine.

Not gonna deny it, it felt wrong to open a letter neither written by nor intended for me, but I did it anyway. If there were gonna be any answers about Rosewood Manor, then they might be here.

The girl had been organized at least. The letters were all clearly dated and written in handwriting far neater than mine. I quickly found the oldest one.

Dear Mama, it began.

I hope that you and Papa are well. I have gotten settled into my new home and am quite safe in my room. Given the stories you used to tell me about Rosewood Manor, you would be distressed to see it in its current state. Still, I have found my own little corner in the west wing and have done my best to make it mine.

I know you are likely worried about me, but don't fret! I have seen none of the man-beast since arriving, for he spends much of his time in a single room. I am taking my responsibilities as caretaker seriously and leave a tray of food outside of his bedroom door at every meal.

Please pass on my regards to Edwin, who I think of fondly despite the discomfort of our last encounter. And tell Kal that I am sorry I will not be able to make his birthday this year. I'm thinking about knitting him a sweater for mid-winter. How much do you think he will have grown by then?

Sincerely,

Susannah

Well, shoot. I read through several from the sizable stack and felt my heart sink further with each one. The early letters were hopeful, clearly written to help alleviate her family from stress and pain. But it wasn't long before the shadows began to creep in at the edges. At first, in the form of loneliness. And then, bone-rattling fear.

"I can hear him moving throughout the house," she wrote one night. "Oh, how he howls! Like a wolf on the prowl, hunting for his prey. Could that prey be me?"

I frowned at that description. That sure as hell didn't sound like the Kris that I had spoken to. He had been polite, deferential. Not the type to take pleasure in scaring a little girl.

Unless it was all an act. Could Kris's wounds have been defensive? Say, from a panicked girl with a knife?

I looked back to the dresses in the closet and frowned. Susannah must have been a slip of a thing, much shorter than my own five feet nine inches. The idea of her even being able to *reach* high enough to cause those wounds, never mind have the physical strength...

What was I missing?

A shiver ran up my spine that I could not blame on the drafty old house. No, this was a memory, fluttering into my mind like a dove. It was from one of Martin's letters, delivered straight from the front lines. He had been describing the Kelvian soldiers and how they had torn through his brothers-in-arms like paper. He had called them "beastly."

My husband had been a straightforward man, never given to poetical statements. Yet, I had assumed that he was speaking metaphorically. Perhaps he hadn't.

Could Kris be one of those soldiers?

A soft sound filled my ears, that of fabric rustling against fabric. I turned to the bed and saw that the quilt had fallen away from the pillow, probably due to my shift in weight. Susannah had spoken about sleeping a lot in her letters, at least the ones I had gotten through. Poor child. I could understand the urge to pull the covers over your head and block out the world.

But I wasn't gonna go there. Instead, I moved to my feet. Two choices were standing in front of me. And, for better or worse, none of them involved me trying to plow my way through Garrick's men with a musket.

My first option was simple. In a little over a month, Amar would return with the caravan. Bet I could even see it from one of the top windows in the house.

But if Susannah was right. If Kris, or hell, something else in this manor put my life in danger, then I would sneak out after dark, taking my chances with the wild animals and Garrick's men.

Either way, I would need to play it cool, act like I was planning on staying. Like the caretaker I was supposed to be.

I sighed. Sometimes life didn't give you any good choices. But it rarely gave you no choices. It was up to you to figure them out.

And these were mine.

6

The Garden

Kris

Over the next few days, I dedicated myself to my quest. I could not allow myself to get attached to Rose Gardner. Could not do anything that might possibly sway her from leaving this place.

This had little impact on my day-to-day activities. I continued to spend most of my time in my bedroom, even after my injuries had healed. The biggest challenge, as always, was to ignore the spirits who found their way into my room. Susannah was my most frequent visitor, but not the only one. I woke up one morning with a start to see two soldiers hovering over me, their spines ramrod straight. Like a coward, I turned my face from them, burying my head in my pillows, which I accidentally tore open with my claws.

My encounters with Rose, as it had been with Susannah, were near non-existent. She arrived at my door three times a day—with a startling consistency—and left behind a tray of food. I would spend the next half hour struggling with the cutlery or spilling soup. Every time this happened, I felt a pang of shame, remembering my oncenimble fingers, and how simple actions were now daily struggles. Sometimes with Susannah, I had left the tray untouched rather than deal with my own ineptness.

I did not do this with Rose. Given that the food always arrived piping hot, it appeared that she was actually cooking, using the kitchen cabinets for ingredients rather than full meals.

I had hoped, in my decision to keep myself distant from Rose, that the unearned sympathy in her eyes would fade. The moment Garrick's men left the property, she would take her opportunity to flee.

And then a familiar noise drifted up to my window.

I placed myself by the woodshed, leaning on a sturdy staff. The sunlight was gentle, thanks to the overcast sky. The shadows I hid in were less about protecting my eyes and more about staying hidden. It was apparent, as it had been from my bedroom window, what Rose Gardner was doing. The question was, why?

She had pulled out an old, rusted wheelbarrow, filling it with weeds from what had once been Rosewood Manor's impressive vegetable garden. A memory fluttered to my mind, that of a small boy with little hands. He had walked out to this very same garden to find a woman on her hands and knees.

"Kris? Is that you?" she had said, shifting her weight until she was looking in my direction. A smile had spread on her face. "You wouldn't be looking to help, would you?"

"Why bother growing anything?" I had asked. "You can buy them in the village."

"Why would I do that when I'm perfectly capable of doing so myself." Ilsa had reached out with one of her puffy hands to tap my cheek affectionately. "And after all, food tastes better when you grow it yourself. Would you like to help?"

Now, I watched as Rose let out a long sigh. Placing her hands on her lower back, she leaned back in a stretch.

"Well," I heard her murmur. "Ma did warn me that my thirties would hit me eventually."

She turned in my direction, then jerked in surprise. I winced, her reaction revealing that my hiding place was just as ineffective now as it had been when I was eight.

Rose was the first to break the silence. "You scared me, Kris."

"I...apologize for any distress I may have caused," I began. "I could go—"

"What? Don't be ridiculous. Just don't lurk around dark corners. It's creepy."

The actions of a beast rather than a man. I knew I should turn away, leaving her to the soil. Instead, I spoke aloud again.

"May I ask what you are doing?"

"Well, it will be planting time soon enough. If we want to be able to eat fresh vegetables this summer, we need to start now," she said in that appealing Verdian drawl of hers.

I smoothed my lips. She was thinking of staying that long? That was far from ideal. Did she suspect that Garrick and his men would guard the manor until then?

I chose my words carefully. "The kitchen cabinets are more than capable—"

"Of what? Creating droopy tomatoes? Flavorless apples? When I realized that that kitchen could produce pretty much anything, including out-of-season stuff, I was thrilled! Then I realized how *bad* it

tasted.”

“Is it that much of a difference?” I cocked my head to the side.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. How long have you been surviving off cabinet food?”

“I...more than a year, I suspect.”

“You don’t say? Now that’s just criminal. Of course, I guess I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up. Something as easy as opening your cabinets and getting any food that you want had to be too good to be true.” She nodded toward the patch of dirt at her feet. “Usually, if something takes a little extra effort, it’s worth it in the long run.”

Food tastes better when it’s grown by your own hands...

“Speaking of which, how’s the bread I’ve been baking for the past couple of days? You must have tasted the difference.”

I paused. While my transformation had resulted in specific senses being enhanced—sight, sound, and to a lesser extent, smell—my sense of taste had been dampened. One dish was more or less interchangeable with another, apart from sweet things. But to disregard her hard work due to my insufficient abilities...

“I did notice a smell the other morning,” I began.

“But not a difference in taste? It’s a good thing I have a healthy ego, or you’d be making me cry right now!”

I winced. “I...apologize, but most food tastes the same for me. I am sure that it was delicious.”

She went very still at that, and I winced, sure that I had insulted her. But perhaps that was preferable? It wasn’t like I wanted to encourage her to stay.

“How are your injuries?” she asked after a long pause.

“I am sufficiently recovered.”

“Good, because I’m sick of acting like your maid.”

“Ah...beg pardon?”

“I’m the caretaker here, I know that. And I have nothing against cooking for people. The Mother knows I did enough of it at home. But now that you’re well enough to come here, you’re just as well enough to walk down to the kitchen. I’m gonna assume that you know where that is?”

“I...yes. Of course.”

“Good. Lunch will be at noon, dinner six, and breakfast seven-thirty. If that’s too early for you, too bad. I’m not the type to sleep in.”

I couldn’t help it. I found myself letting out a chuckle.

“You think I’m kidding now?” She narrowed her eyes.

“No. It’s just that you remind me of someone I used to know as a child.”

“Huh,” she said before reaching down and picking up the hoe. She gripped the handle and penetrated the soil. I winced, knowing it was not likely to be an easy process.

Which is probably why I began moving forward.

“Ground’s so damn hard,” she said. “When’s the last time this garden was used anyway?”

“About five years ago,” I replied, now a mere foot away from her.

Rose froze, my increased proximity catching her off guard. She slowly turned in my direction, her eyes widening slightly upon seeing me standing behind her. And who could blame her? My form was designed to intimidate. My legs were long and strong, allowing me to jump and spring when the occasion called for it. The shape of them, knees bent in the wrong direction, was challenging to the wardrobe in my room, leaving me with trousers that often left off at the knee. My feet were hopeless. Although the claws on them were not as intimidating as the ones that adorned my hands, there was not a single shoe that could contain them. I mostly went barefoot and did my best not to step on anything uncomfortable.

My top half was an equal challenge for clothes. The wardrobe could produce shirts that fit my massive torso and broad shoulders, but my arms were too bulky for sleeves. Give the excess weight on my top half, I walked with a stoop, hence the walking stick I always kept on me. Without it, I would have found it more comfortable to fall to all fours, resting my massive weight on my knuckles like an animal in truth.

But it was probably not my shape or even my size that caught Rose off guard, but my face. That wolf-like muzzle, those sharp, wicked teeth, and glowing red eyes. They were designed to terrify hardened soldiers. Even someone as fearless as Rose Gardner could be caught off guard.

“Once again,” I began. “I apologize for scaring you. I was trying to be less ‘creepy,’ as you put it.”

“It’s fine. Next time just clear your throat or something.”

“I’m sure I can manage that, Madam Gardner. But for now, would you like some assistance?”

She blinked. “Actually, yes. And it’s just Rose, Kris.”

With that, she handed me the hoe. I accepted it and immediately began digging into the soil.

“Have you done this before?” she asked.

“Something similar, at least.”

“A gardening beast,” she shook her head. “Not quite what I’d expected.”

“I hope I’m not proving to be a disappointment.”

“No, it’s just...were you a soldier?”

I paused, the question seemingly coming out of nowhere.

“No, I never fought in the war,” I replied before turning back to the dirt.

“It’s just...my late husband, he wrote about the Kelvian forces, said some of them looked like...”

Her voice trailed off.

I closed my eyes. “Like me?”

“Well, yeah. Beastly, he said. I had assumed that he was exaggerating, but...”

He most certainly was not.

“Was your husband killed by a solider that looked like me?” I asked.

“No, it was friendly fire. Martin, for all his kindness, was undeniably Kelvian, and on the battlefield...well, things can get confusing. At least that’s what I’ve been told. They buried him in a mass grave at Verdian fields.”

I swallowed, remembering past reports.

“The Battle of Verdian Fields,” I remarked. “One of the greatest tragedies of the war. I’m not sure if they’ll ever know exactly how many lives were lost.”

“Well,” Rose said stiffly. “Given that it was the battle that won the war for Kelvia, I’m gonna assume that more *Verdian* lives were lost.”

“That may not be true. Kelvia may have won the war, but from all accounts, the losses we suffered were far greater in number. There was simply no way that we could make up for those massive defeats to Verdia’s superior Navy.”

“If we did so well, then why did our damn king surrender?”

“Wisdom. Your monarch saw the consequences tied to losing so many young men. There are villages in this nation where there are barely any left, leaving no one to work the fields or help create the next generation. Your king may have lost the war, but it was in the interest of keeping his nation fed and alive.”

“Unlike the Butcher.”

The Butcher. At the mention of the King of Kelvia’s famous nickname, my entire body tensed. There was a long pause, and I realized that Rose was looking for an answer.

“Yes,” I said. “Unlike the Butcher.”

“How can you Kelvians follow that brute? They say that thin-skinned fool started a war over a personal slight!”

I winced before reporting. “Admittedly, Kelvia is not like Hijan. Our leaders inherit their power. They are not selected due to any earned traits.”

“Yeah. Just like Verdia, I guess.” Rose’s head dropped. “Anyway, I guess it’s not good manners to insult someone else’s king in their own damn house, much as he clearly deserved it.” She added that last bit under her breath. “Especially in houses like this that are...well, pretty weird.”

“Very weird,” I added as I dug into the ground.

“It’s strange. But I sometimes wonder if this place can read my mind. The food in the cabinets, this dress? Hell, I even found seedlings in the toolshed, just like the ones I was hoping to plant. It’s almost like...am I wrong to think that this building is trying to help me?”

I split the ground with the hoe again and shook my head.

“That’s dangerous thinking, Madam Gardner.”

“Why is that?”

“I would suggest against trusting the manor...or any type of magic on that level.” My voice came out sharper than intended.

“Huh, sounds like you’ve had some experience with magic.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Yes, I would say so,” I replied with a wince. “Have you?”

“Not really,” she said. “At least beyond the normal stuff. You know, powders to soothe a cough. Droughts to take care of labor pains.”

As a beast, I did not own eyebrows per se, but it’s safe to say that had I possessed them, that last comment would have raised them in surprise.

“The latter goes a little beyond the ‘normal stuff.’”

“Babies are born all the time, Kris.”

“I...am not denying that. But you are speaking of a potion that must be brewed for seven days ending at the full moon, and then consumed before The Divine Mother’s cycle is complete again.”

“Yeah, well, I was West Ridge’s—that’s the name of my village—I was always their best cook, and the local herbalist used to tell me that cooking was just a few steps away from magic. When she needed help, she’d call me.”

“Did she instruct you on magical theory?” My voice rose in interest.

“Uh...no, actually. But I’m gonna bet based on how you just rattled off that labor pain drought from memory, that *you* know plenty.”

“Then I hope you’ll allow me to explain. It will help you...grasp our situation here at the manor more fully. Creating magic for small or medium-sized events, such as the medical situations you

described, is one thing. Once the powder has been inhaled or the draught consumed, the power is, more or less, used up. When dealing with larger spells, a magical byproduct is left behind in its wake.”

“What? Like whey?”

“I...yes, that is not a bad comparison. Most magicians will find a use for leftover magic. It can be convenient, and there are consequences to letting power just settle. Over time, it can assume a sort of sentience. But, not having a proper mind, it cannot be reasoned with, and it is never wise to trust something that cannot be reasoned with.”

“Huh. Well then, I’m gonna assume that once you reach the level of food appearing in cabinets and seedlings showing up in the woodshed that you’re dealing with quite a lot of magic.”

“That would be correct.” I felt a smile twitch on my lips. Clever woman. “Now, how large do you wish this garden to be?”

She blinked at the subject change, then directed me to the nearby post. As I continued to dig, I noticed that she had a far-off look in her eyes as she began to wander toward a truth that I had been forbidden to speak for over a year.

About the curse that lay upon me.

The Stain

Rose

The sunlight crept through the shutters. I could see it through my closed eyelids. For a second, I kept them shut tight. For one day, one stinking day, I'd like the option of sleeping in. One day without hens to care for, or hours of gardening to tackle, or a trip into town to hit up the market before all the good meat was bought up. But that never seemed to come. I let out a sigh and reached across the bed for Martin, hoping at least for a *little* marital affection before—

I froze, finding nothing but empty air and twisted sheets. I felt my heart leap up to my throat, eyes springing open.

He wouldn't...Not without saying goodbye...

"You're up."

I pushed myself up into a sitting position just in time to see Martin enter the room. The wooden tray looked ridiculously small against those massive hands of his, and he had to duck to clear the threshold. My house was clearly not meant for people of Martin's size, but we made do.

"How late is it?" I asked.

"Not much past dawn." He placed the tray on the nightstand next to the bed.

I frowned. "You should have woken me earlier."

"It's not particularly late."

My husband sat on our bed, then bent toward the tray, reaching for my favorite—well, only—earthenware mug. He passed it to me.

"Not to mention," he continued, "I wanted to make you coffee."

"I should be the one making *you* coffee today." I took a sip and winced at its bitterness. "I figured that if there's anything that could convince you not to leave, it would be my cooking."

Martin let out a long sigh, a sound I have grown used to over our five years of marriage.

"That's not true, and you know it," he said. "I have a responsibility to fight in this war as much as any man in the village."

"Against your own countrymen?"

"They haven't been my countrymen for years. Not since they cast me out. And had they not, I would have never come to Verdia, or stumbled into West Ridge, or had the chance to meet the most beautiful woman in the world."

As he spoke, he reached out and cupped my face in his hands, his eyes all warmth and tenderness. It had taken years to coax such honest emotion out of him.

And now, I couldn't stand it.

"Not beautiful enough to stay." I dropped my gaze.

"Rose," Martin said, his voice half a groan. "I don't want to fight, especially not today, given what could follow."

I pressed my lips into an angry line. What could follow? I sure as hell knew what could follow. Martin was going to war. He could be injured or die. And yes, I knew that death was a necessary part of the cycle of life, and we were all bound for the Father's embrace, but *dammit*, I had assumed that we'd be given more time!

So instead, I focused on the lesser of his sins. Martin wasn't gonna die. My husband was *leaving* me. The idea was just as strange. I had spent the first thirty years of my life in West Ridge and had never wandered beyond the surrounding towns. I knew every inch of this village. Could name every one of its inhabitants. Even the ones I didn't like all that much. I felt my place and purpose in West Ridge all as keenly as a knife. If it were up to me, I would live in this very house until Martin and I were both old and gray and needed grandchildren to carry us in our rocking chairs.

And now, he was leaving me.

"Rose," Martin said. "I will do everything within my power to come back to you, I promise. You know that, Rose."

I grit my teeth in response.

"Rose," Martin replied, voice low and warning.

I looked up, locking gazes with him, ready to spit a retort right back in that big, dumb, handsome face of his. Because he was already breaking that promise. The rules stated that every Veridian man

must send one son to fight in the war. Martin, a Kelvian, was the son of no Verdian. There was no reason for him to go.

No reason for him to die.

But instead of angry, I felt tears fill up my eyes. I let out a long, wet sniff.

“Oh, Rose,” Martin said, pulling me into a bear hug. I threw my arms around him, burying my face into his chest, spilling my coffee, and staining Ma’s handmade quilt that we had slept beneath since our wedding night.

That stain sat there, as stark as blood, during the year that Martin spent at war. It kept watch over me the day his brothers-in-arms brought back his musket and heard me let out a howl more animal than woman. And it waited patiently during the months that I had stared at the weapon, remembering my husband’s steadfast faith.

Eventually, I gained the courage to stand up and take the weapon from the wall, leaving the only home that I had ever known for the sake of my Martin’s immortal soul.

And I couldn’t even do that right.

With a sniff, I pushed myself up into a sitting position in another bed, this in the servant’s wing of Rosewood Manor.

I hadn’t used the same room as Susannah had. It felt disrespectful, and I didn’t see the point in being so damn far away from the kitchen. Instead, I set up shop in a duo of rooms that had probably belonged to a senior staff member, like a housekeeper. It included a bedroom, one of those fancy rooms that were made for just sitting around, and a massive luxury—a lavatory with running water.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that a large manor meant to be staffed by dozens wouldn’t fare well under little old me. Instead, I decided to focus on what was important: keeping both of us fed.

Over the past week, I had spent much of my time in the kitchen and in the garden. It made life predictable, almost comforting. Then I lay down in bed at night and, surrounded by nothing but my own stinking thoughts, melancholy started to suck me back in.

I sighed and reached down to Susannah’s small bag, where her packet of letters sat. I had taken to reading them in those moments of weaknesses when I wanted to do nothing more than sleep. Probably a sign that I should just go and get a damn book or something. At least then, I wouldn’t be poking through a girl’s private thoughts. These letters were more like her diary than anything else. They had clearly never been sent.

"The damp seems to permeate every inch of the house in moments like these," she wrote, *"and not even the fire in my room can truly banish the chill. I cannot help but wonder, have you spoken to Edwin recently? If so, has he mentioned me? I must admit, I have dreamt about him standing beneath my windows, bursting through the doors with his musket, ensuring my release.*

"And then I awaken, and I remember how unlikely that such an event truly is."

I frowned, placing the letter down on my lap. Another mention of this "Edwin." Given how stinking formal Kelvians were, the fact that she always used his first name had given me pause. What type of relationship had the two had? This letter made it all too clear that he had been some sort of beau, or at least Susannah wanted him to be. My thoughts drifted back to Susannah's few possessions. Had he given her that tin locket? Or even the silver ring?

And, if that was the case, why had he never come for her?

With a sigh, I placed the letters back in the bag. I really needed to find a better way to entertain myself. But it, like Kris's tantalizing hints about magic and the manor, was like a damn puzzle. And once I started digging, it was hard not to wonder about what really lay beneath.

The Spy

Rose

I could make out the smell of baking scones as I walked to the kitchen. I didn't waste time. Kris had taken my instructions about showing up for meals to heart, sometimes even arriving early to keep me company as I cooked. The couple of times he stayed away had come with advance warning, at least. Those days, he seemed quieter, not eating nearly as much as he should. And that made me feel... not right. It wasn't like I was insulted. Not when he couldn't even *taste* my cooking. Didn't change the fact that the sight of him filled with sadness left an ache in my chest.

For whatever reason.

But today was not one of those days. I moved down the hall, my mind on that big plate of scones cooling on the windowsill. Of course, I wasn't sure how the raspberries provided by the manor would taste compared to the real ones, but I sure as hell had put enough sugar...

The sound of a child's laughter bubbled to my ears, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. I reached up a hand, resting it beneath my curls, which were pinned up and out of the way. Why had such an innocent sound—

Before I had time to linger on it, the patter of footsteps—no, running feet—came racing toward me. I spun around, knowing that the runner should be right behind me.

Instead, I saw nothing. The steps continued, darting down the hall and through the solid kitchen door.

And then they stopped.

I swallowed. What had *that* been? Mother knows I wasn't meant to live an isolated life like this. But I had assumed that it would take more than a week for me to crack!

I shivered and headed to the kitchen, my own footsteps moving just a little bit faster than before.

Stepping inside, I was comforted by smells that had nurtured me since I was old enough to see over the countertops. This kitchen was clearly designed for more substantial fare than I was used to, with its massive cast iron stove, brick oven, and large island. Kris sat next to this island, looking far too big for the heavy-duty stool I had found on my first day. He caught sight of me and nodded.

“Good morning, Madam Gardner,” he said. “I hope you slept well.”

A small chuckle escaped my lips. And sure, I couldn’t quite read his muzzle as if it were a human face, but there was no getting around the confusion in his voice as he spoke next.

“Did I say something funny?”

“Not at all. It’s just the way you talk, Kris. Always so polite and proper.”

“Does that offend you?”

“Mother, no.” I circled around him so I could fill the kettle. “I guess you’re just too fancy for me. Makes a girl wonder if you’ve grown up rich, with tutors and the like.”

“Why, yes. I grew up wealthy.”

“So that makes you...what do you Kelvians call landowners? A noble?”

“That is correct. Does that bother you?”

“Nah,” I said as I lit the stove. “You can’t be blamed for where you come from, after all.” I paused as I placed the kettle on the burner. “Hmmm. I know that you said you’ve only been at Rosewood for the past year, but—”

I caught sight of a small white hand reaching for my plate of scones resting on the windowsill. My neck snapped toward it like a striking snake.

“None of that now!” I hollered loud enough to make Kris jump. The hand jerked back, sending the plate of pastries flying. I darted across the kitchen, throwing open the door with a bang. I stepped out just in time to see a small figure. It retreated into the copse of trees that sheltered the back of the house from the complete lack of sun.

“Oh no,” I murmured. “You’re not getting away that easily.”

I gathered my skirts and started to run, circling my way around the trees. And sure, my journey would be longer, but I also knew how overgrown that patch was. And that might be enough to slow—

I reached the other side just in time to see my thief trip over a root and onto his face. His prize—the scone, half crushed from his grip—bounced across the dirt. I crossed the space between us in long, swift strides before reaching down to grab the little rascal by his ear.

“Who are you and what right do you have to come and steal the scores that I woke up at *four* in the morning...”

I finally caught sight of the boy’s face and found myself falling silent.

But only for a moment.

“You! You’re the little brat who called me a Verdian whore.”

Oooh boy. I could feel my face heat up at the sight of him. I opened my mouth, prepared to give him a proper tongue lashing, only to have him blurt out his response.

“I was hungry!”

And then, to emphasize his point, his stomach chose that very moment to let out a growl.

I let out a sigh, the anger leaking from me like a bucket with a hole in it. A very big hole.

“Well,” I finally said. “If you were so stinking hungry, why didn’t you ask?”

The boy blinked in response. “You...would have given me one?”

“Of course, you ninny! What kinda a woman do you take me for? Oh, wait, I know. You already told me.”

The child at least had the decency to look properly chagrined.

“Well,” I said, straightening up. “Come on now.”

“Come on?” His face scrunched up in confusion.

“Not like you can eat *that one*. Let’s see how many didn’t end up in the dirt.”

I began to head to the house, only to pause a few seconds later when I realize the boy hadn’t followed.

“Something wrong?” I asked, turning back to him.

“It’s j-just,” he stuttered. “The man-beast. I c-can’t...”

“Do you think I’d let anything happen to you? Come on. You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

At first, he remained still, and then his stomach growled once more, even louder than the first time.

Let’s just say, I didn’t need to ask the kid again.

By the time we got back to the kitchen, I had begun to wonder if I had promised the boy something I couldn’t deliver. After all, a few of those scones had gone straight out the window and into the mud. Would there be any left to share? My question was immediately answered the second I stepped inside to see Kris reaching over to pick up the last scone that had fallen on the floor. His ears twitched as the door swung open, and he turned in my direction.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “Madam Gardner, I...”

His voice trailed off the second he made eye contact with the boy, whose face went as white as a sheet. And to be honest, part of me couldn’t blame the kid. I was a social creature by nature. I couldn’t just hide in my room as Susannah had. But even after a week of breakfast, lunch, and dinner with the guy, there was still something *unnerving* about Kris’s appearance. I wasn’t sure what it was exactly. Human intelligence in an inhuman face? His size? I couldn’t blame the kid for looking scared.

“Perhaps,” Kris said after a few seconds of awkward silence. “I should go elsewhere.”

The hell he would! This was my kitchen, and we clearly could eat together like civilized folk. But then I saw the way that his ears dropped, and his nose dipped.

Shame. Kris was ashamed.

And would likely continue to be if I made him sit there for all of breakfast as he struggled to get his claws around the cutlery. It was why I had made scones. They were easy enough to pop in the mouth.

The eggs, on the other hand.

“Then let me send you up with a plate of those,” I said.

“If...it’s not too much trouble,” Kris replied, then added. “Although most of them ended up on the floor.”

“It’s clean enough,” I replied, pulling out a plate from a nearby cabinet. “Maybe I can convince this one to sweep the floor for me to make up for sending half of them out the window.”

I gave a pointed look at the boy as I spoke, not that he could see. His terrified gaze was still focused on Kris.

“There,” I said, passing him a plate. “Some for you and some for us.”

“Oh,” he said, “this is too much.”

“Well, there’s more *of* you. Makes sense that you should get the lion’s share.”

Kris opened his mouth as if to protest, then closed, accepting the plate and leaving the room while murmuring an apology. Once I was sure he was out of earshot, I turned to the kid.

“You embarrassed him,” I said, eyebrows raised.

“But he’s a monster!”

“Well, gee, I didn’t notice!” I rolled my eyes. “You Kelvians are all the same, judging people based on how they look rather than waiting to see the whole picture. And how do you like your eggs?”

“Huh?”

As I was speaking, I had been moving toward the cast iron pan I had rested on the stove. The basket of eggs sat on the nearby counter.

“Your eggs, boy! Unless you think that’s gonna be enough for you?”

The boy looked over at what was left of the scones.

“I...like eggs,” he said.

“Course you do. I’ll make you some.” I reached for the spatula. “Now don’t you go eating all of those pastries now. You better save at least one for me.”

The boy murmured a response, nearly as unintelligible as Kris’s had been, before moving to the island and pulling up a chair.

“Oh, and by the way,” I added. “For the eggs, I’m gonna need a name.”

“Mpfh?” The boy replied, mouth filled with pastry.

“Chew, then swallow. This is a conversation, not a race.”

“Sorry,” he replied. “I’m Kal.”

Hmmm. Why did that one sound familiar?

“Another K name, I see,” I said. “You Kelvian’s are really lacking in originality.”

I cracked a couple of eggs over the already-hot skillet (thank you, cursed manor) with a single hand.

“Better than being named after some plant,” the boy replied, voice sulky.

“Plant! A rose is a flower, boy. A beautiful flower! And even if it were just ‘some plant,’ at least it’s something real.”

Rather than being named after some stupid old tradition.

Ages ago, Kelvia and Verdia were just one country. Succession to the throne was done the traditional way, from father to firstborn son. It went alright for the most part. That was until the queen happened to give birth to two identical twin boys, Kelvin and Verdis. When both children survived until their naming day, the king knew he had a problem. The two babies were the same age. Who would be the crown prince?

Eventually, they went with the more obvious answer. Kelvin had come out first, so he would inherit the throne. Verdis would be the spare, educated in all the same ways his brother was on the off chance his twin would kick it before he had time to produce an heir of his own.

It didn’t take long before people started noticing potential problems. Kelvin, a likable enough lad, was impulsive and didn’t exactly take his future role as king all that seriously. Verdis was more

cautious, educated. As the boys began to approach their second decade, whispers began to fly around court that the king had picked the wrong son to be heir.

These whispers, although troubling, weren't taken seriously. The king was young enough and hale, and it was assumed that Kelvian would even out as he got a few more years in him. Then, a freak illness struck, killing the reigning monarch. Kelvin, freshly crowned, took the whispers about his brother pretty seriously. Within the year, he had exiled Verdis and all his followers to a large island in the south. From all accounts, it was a pretty rough first decade.

Everything changed the day that the Hijanni arrived in their longboats, looking to trade with the west. This island nation, now called Verdia, was ideally placed as a port. The country began to flourish, and Kelvin became jealous. He wanted nothing more than to claim it, locking the two nations in a centuries-long cycle of war and peace.

Despite all evidence that Kevlin was a terrible king, and a right bastard at that, Kelvians continued to immortalize him by giving so many of their firstborn boys a name with a hard "K" sound. This could show up in the front, like Kal, or back like Garrick. Clearly, this boy wasn't the first "K" I had come across and wouldn't be the last.

He could take directions, at least, I thought with a sigh. I turned around to see one sad, half-squished scone, waiting on the plate for me. So much for all that work. Kris wasn't the only one who liked sweets.

I placed the plate of eggs in front of Kal. It's a good thing I handed him silverware as well. The boy dug in so fast I'm convinced he would have done so without the benefit of a knife and fork.

With a sigh, I reached for my single scone and took a seat.

"Mind if I ask you a question, Kal?" I asked, and when he nodded added, "Why the hell were you hanging outside of my window?"

The boy took time to swallow before replying, "Headman Garrick wanted me to keep an eye on you, make sure you didn't leave."

"An awful big responsibility for one boy."

"It's not like I'm alone. There are two more men out there."

Wonderful. I let out a sigh before speaking. "Why is Garrick still continuing to push the matter? I'm clearly staying."

"I know! I even told the headmen that you were planting a garden—"

Bingo!

“But he seems to think that it’s some sorta trick and that you’ll just leave when the Hajanni caravan cycles back.”

Well, damn. I suppose I should have seen that coming. Looks like sneaking out might be more complicated than I had planned.

“Kal, did Garrick have you do this with Susannah too, or am I just special.”

“Susie? No. But with everything that happened, he just thinks you might need a few more...”

It was the nickname that did it. Made me think about those damn letters. I felt the pieces in my mind click together.

“Kal, you wouldn’t have happened to be *related to* Susannah?”

“She’s my sister,” he piped up, then dropped his gaze. “Well, was.”

I felt my stomach drop. It was clear from the villagers’ reactions that they assumed Kris was responsible for Susannah’s death. And if Kal thought the same, then let’s just say he had another reason to fear my mild-mannered beast.

9

The Library

Kris

Two weeks after Rose arrived, I heard a shuffling in the library.

It was thanks to my sensitive ears. They could pick up on even the most minute sounds, from the mice beneath the floorboards to the fluttering of batwings at night. I pushed myself up from my place in bed and walked to the door. I opened it wide and turned in the direction of the near-empty room. Seconds later, I heard a shuffle again and frowned.

It hadn't taken long for Rose to fall into a routine. I could expect to find her in the kitchen during mealtimes, the garden in the mornings, and her rooms later. And while she did wander, her interest in the library had dropped after her first day.

I felt my ears twitch, curiosity consuming me. What was she looking for?

I walked down the hall, turning the corner that would lead me away from the bedroom, only to freeze. Because at the end of the hallway was a single, solidly built woman, her back to me, her body impossibly still.

It was a spirit I was all too familiar with.

From behind me, I heard a snort. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

I frowned and turned around to see Susannah standing behind me, arms crossed over her chest, lips formed into a pout. How old had she been at death? Fifteen?

The look she gave me was pure loathing.

"Where are you going, Kris?" she asked.

"I thought..." My eyes began to drift back toward my destination.

"Going to see Rose again?"

“Why, yes. She appears to be looking for—”

“Awfully strange, seeing that you’re supposed to convince her to leave.”

“That’s true.” I stood up straighter. “She’s not safe here.”

“Clearly.” She rolled her eyes. “But what you say and how you act...”

“What are you trying to insinuate, Miss Dawes?”

“Do you think I’m blind? Taking meals with her. Coming down early to keep her company as she cooks. Helping her in the garden. It’s like you’ll make any excuse to spend time with her.”

“The sight of my face was enough of a deterrent for you.”

“That’s because she’s different. She doesn’t know what’s coming. Not that it helped...”

She paused, and at that moment, all the hardness left her eyes, replaced by unshed tears. I watched as her bottom lip trembled, and she was forced to look away.

And then she swallowed and looked back to me with narrowed eyes.

“She’s dangerous,” the girl said.

“Rose?” I backed up a step. “I don’t know what—”

“She’s dangerous because she makes you forget. Forget who you are. What you did. But don’t worry.” She glided across the floor as she spoke, until she was right next to me, somehow only inches away from my ear. Her last words were delivered in a whisper. “We won’t.”

And then she was gone, vanishing as quickly as she came. I swallowed and looked back down the hall, to find the other spirit had left as well.

My ears twitched at a familiar sound of a single book being placed back on the shelf. My steps brought me forward until I was standing mere inches away from the library door.

For a moment, I was caught, frozen by indecision. The sight of Susannah, tears in her eyes, filled my mind, and I began to shift back to my room, the floorboards creaking beneath my feet.

“Kris, is that you?” Rose called out from the library.

I paused, then turned to the door. “Yes. Coming.”

I entered the room to find her standing next to one of the bookshelves, perhaps the only one worthy of that name given that the rest were bare. Rose had pried open one of the window shutters. The pale sunlight streamed in, illuminating her warm skin, soft curls. Her lips curled up in a beautiful smile.

And for a moment, I could not think of a word to say.

“Thank the Mother,” Rose said. “I don’t know where to start. How are these even organized?”

I swallowed and then took a step forward. “They’re...not.” At least not anymore. “Are you looking for something to pass the time?”

"Not quite, although that's not a bad idea. I need an almanac or something like that. So much of what Pa taught me about planting? It doesn't seem to apply up here. The seasons are all off. Do you have something like that?"

"I...of course."

Although I swore I could feel Susannah's gaze burning into my back as I did it, I approached Rose and reached to the top of the shelf before picking up a well-worn book, bound in green.

"This should provide you with the information you need," I said, passing it to her.

"Thank the Mother! I must look like the biggest country hick." She let out a sigh. "I swear I had books in my house. My parents did too. They're just so expensive. A room like this..." She frowned, looking at the empty shelves. "Well, I suppose it has the *space*, at least."

I followed her gaze and nodded. "The volumes of value have been removed. Although there are still jewels to be found."

I reached up to the top shelf to pick up a slightly larger book, this one bound in a deep chestnut brown, paying extra careful attention to my claws.

"I...I would enjoy showing this one to you," I said, suddenly unable to meet her gaze.

"Sure thing. Not like I have an urgent appointment."

A deep chuckle emerged from my chest, and I headed over to a large book stand. I placed the title on the wood and nodded to Rose.

"Would you mind opening it for me? My claws."

Rose complied without question and read the title aloud. "*A Lady's Sketchbook?*"

"A humble title for a rather extraordinary book," I admitted. "Likely, the only way she could get it published as a woman, shielding it behind a screen of femininity. This artwork was compiled by Lady Amelia, who was quite a world traveler. Kelvia, Verdis, Hijan, the Fair Isles...she visited them all between the ages of fifteen and twenty-seven. And every place she went, she drew."

"Drew what?"

"Everything."

With a frown, Rose turned the page to reveal a view of a harbor, the masts of tall ships towering over nearby rooftops. The next page featured a trio of puffins, nestled among the rocks. Rose continued to flip through to see two women bartering in a bustling Hijanni marketplace, images of the Kelvian capital, seen from a distance, and that of a tiny chickadee nestled in a girl's hand.

"This was always my favorite," I admitted. "Because Lady Amelia not only drew the majestic but the simple as well. In fact, I would say that she took even more care in the everyday than she did with

some of our more famous landmarks.”

Rose turned another page and let out a small, involuntary sigh at the sight of a beautiful landscape of a quaint village nestled near a mountainside.

“It looks like West Ridge,” she said, a touch of sadness in her voice.

“I...do you miss it?”

“Not everything. Like bickering over prices at the market or getting up before dawn to tend to the chickens. But I do miss the people. Not being treated like an invader just because I look different and have an accent.” She ran her fingers over the edges of the pages. “Then again, people weren’t too kind to my Martin either. I sometimes wonder if that’s why he went off to war. To prove that he was one of us.”

I opened my mouth to say...what? Empty words of sympathy? For all the shadows in my past, I had never experienced the loss of a spouse. Would the next words out of my mouth invoke comfort or sound cruel?

Instead, Rose turned to me, a small smile on her face.

“Thanks for showing this to me,” she said with a forced laugh. “Maybe it will help me plan my next adventure.”

“You wish to travel?”

I immediately realized my mistake. She had clearly been speaking in jest, the possibility of a future beyond Rosewood Manor an uncertain thing. I watched as her face fell and then, to my surprise, went pensive, amused even.

“Huh,” she said, lips spreading into a smile. “Rose Gardner, world traveler. I kinda like the sound of that. Do you think I could manage?”

“I imagine you could do anything you put your mind to, Rose.”

I watched as the smile slipped from her lips, and for a moment, I caught something like sadness there. Then she blinked and shook her head. “Anyway, I should probably head back to that garden.”

She turned to move, one of her feet tripping over the base of the book stand. She tumbled forward, and I instinctually reached out to steady her. I watched as her eyes went wide, her mouth forming into an “o” of surprise.

I felt my blood turn to ice. Had I hurt her with my claws?

Then, to my surprise, she let out a laugh. “Well, damn! I’m such a klutz. Probably a sign that big fancy rooms like this aren’t for me.”

The warmth of her smile was infectious, and I felt the edges of my lips pull upwards into what would have been a smile on human lips, but on a predator looked more like the barring of fangs.

“Thank you, Kris.” She patted me on the arm, her fingers trailing across the back of my hand as she passed.

I stood there longer than necessary, doing my best to remember the warmth of her touch long after it had faded. Susannah’s words echoed in my mind.

She’s dangerous.

I swallowed at the thought. Because Susannah’s words had not been entirely accurate. Rose could not help the way that she was, her forthrightness and kindness. No, the danger, as always, came from another source.

From me.

I wanted her to escape. To not be trapped between these four walls, as I was. I knew that the smartest, kindest thing for me to do would be to encourage her to leave.

But there was another, more selfish part of me that wanted something very different. While I knew that it was best to keep my distance, I could not help but find myself drawn in, satellite-like, hovering closer and closer into her orbit.

The Glass House

Rose

It's a good thing those cabinets didn't charge me for eggs because it wasn't long before Kal was showing up for regular meals. I suppose it was the smells that did it. I would open the oven, pull out a fresh loaf of bread or something similar, and there he would be, standing in the doorway, eyes all big.

Of course, he scattered the moment he heard Kris's footsteps coming down the hall.

Kris, on the other hand, was turning into quite a companion. Whenever I found myself working in the garden, struggling over a job that required more strength than dexterity, he would appear just like magic. And come mealtime, I would catch him slipping in the door when I was chopping vegetables or kneading bread. I'd be sitting there, humming to myself, then turn around to find a giant, wolf-headed beast sitting at my kitchen table, quiet as a church mouse.

"You know," I found myself saying. "For someone as big as you are, you're awfully silent."

"I did ah...clear my throat as you previously suggested," Kris replied. "Should I have done more?"

"Nah. My head was elsewhere. Trying to figure this out." I nodded down to the dough in my hands.

"Is there something wrong?"

"It's the...what's the word? Altitude? The bread doesn't rise properly, so I've been adjusting my proportions to get it right."

"That's interesting," Kris replied with a nod. "I did not realize how difficult cooking was until I met you. Does this frustrate you?"

“Naw, there’s something kinda fun about a good puzzle, you know?” I moved the dough to a bowl, which I covered with a cloth. “What frustrates me is the fact that I don’t have any decent spices to work with.” I gestured at the small rack in front of me. “Now these dried ones work in a pinch, but nothing can substitute for good fresh ginger. Or garlic. What I would give for a clove of garlic that didn’t come from one of these cabinets. Not to mention rosemary, mint, thyme...”

“I may be able to help you with some of those.”

“Huh?” I turned to him with a frown.

Kris gave me a minute to wash my hands before leading me out of the kitchen and through Rosewood Manor. As we made our way to the East Wing of the manor, I could have sworn that the shadows around me lengthened, the walls seeming to lean in closer. And then laughter, light and young, bubbled up around me.

“Do you hear that, Kris?” I asked.

My beastly companion paused and turned to me.

“No...and my hearing is quite acute.”

“Right. So, either the manor’s playing tricks on me, or I’m going insane due to all the solitary confinement.”

“The former has been known to happen,” Kris replied, continuing to make his way down the hallway. “Although I would not completely discount the latter.”

“Not encouraging, Kris! This is not the first time I’ve heard this...*laughter!*”

“Laughter?”

“Children laughing and running around the place, which I guess isn’t that strange of a thing for my mind to drudge up.”

“That...is an interesting comment.”

“Well, you see, Martin and I? We hadn’t wanted to start a family right off. And then the war pushed things back even more. My mom kept warning me about going baby mad. I thought she was nuts, but...”

“Regardless of the cause, it would be best to avoid the places where you hear such things. The manor has led people astray before.”

“Geeze, Kris! Blurting out mysterious and terrifying statements like that. You’d think you were trying to scare me away.”

“When one’s speech is so...restricted, it’s hard not to sound ominous and vague with one’s proclamations.”

“Gee. You think?”

Eventually, we got to a place that I had only seen from the grounds. It was a room connected to the house and made almost completely of glass. I had peered through the frosted panes before and saw what looked like an indoor forest, which seems all sorts of impractical. Now things were a little clearer.

“Is this a garden?” I said, looking at the tables in front of me.

“Of sorts,” Kris replied. “Or...at least it was at one point.”

I’ll say! Never mind my little patch of dirt outside. This room could house more than its fair share of plants. Not that there was much green remaining. The pots contained little more than dirt and dead things, and the tables were covered in a thin layer of dust as if it hadn’t been touched in years.

But Kris ignored all this, choosing to walk to a small table where something fresh and green lay. He turned around to reveal that he was holding a small rectangular box, about the width of my forearm, filled with green.

“That’s mint,” I said, taking a step forward. “And rosemary, and...Kris, when you said you had ‘some experience’ with plants, I didn’t expect this!”

“Whatever I am, it’s a failed one,” he said. “This small box is the only thing left of my collection.”

“But so much...what happened here?”

In response, Kris shook his head. Right, the manor wouldn’t let him answer any real questions.

But as he said, that didn’t mean I shouldn’t ask them. So instead, I turned to the few plants left, thinking back to Pa’s lessons from when I was small.

“Stinging nettle,” I said. “Wolfsbane. These aren’t items found in most kitchens. These are more the items of an herbalist or...a magician?”

Kris’s ears perked up at the last one, his lips forming into a smile that looked less creepy now that I knew him.

“Kris,” I took a step forward. “Are you a magician?”

“I cannot comment on what I may or may not be” —he paused— “or once was.”

“You *were* a magician,” I said, taking a step toward him. “Is that why you look like this? What about the manor then? You mentioned something about leftover magic before...”

“These questions are getting a little more complex,” Kris said, a note of warning in his voice.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s think back on what I know. Those ‘beastly soldiers?’ You said you weren’t one of them. No, you said that you’ve never been to war. That’s different.”

“Quite so.”

“But perhaps the same process that changed them also transformed you. Only for some reason, you’re *stuck* as a beast. A magician stuck under a curse. By the Mother, I thought this was a puzzle, but it’s just a fairy story.” I stepped forward, reaching out and resting a hand on his. “And I know how those end. We have to figure out a way to change you back.”

“I... no.” He backed up a step. “I never should have brought you in here, Rose. Knowingly led you toward these topics. You are a kind soul, after all. I should have known that you would come to this conclusion. But as nice as it finally is to speak with someone of such things...”

His voice trailed off.

“What is it, Kris?” I asked.

He paused and looked to the moon chart on the wall again.

“Rose, I am well aware of the predicament that you are in. Of your inability to leave. That you are not here by choice.”

Well, that was a change of subject.

“But in a week’s time, on the night of the full moon...” He paused, for a long time, and then, of all things, a low growl emitted from his throat.

“Kris?” I asked.

“Of all the things that I am not allowed to explain.” He shook his head. “Rose, in a week’s time, it will not be safe here. You may want to consider spending a night outside the manor.”

“Outside! With Garrick’s men out there?”

“Or at the very least, barricading yourself in a room somewhere. The magic of the manor...” He turned back to one of the tables, where a workbench lay.

“Kris,” I began. “I understand that you are trying to tell me something, but you can’t. But don’t just leave me hanging like this. What’s gonna happen in a week?”

He ducked his head before speaking. “You speak of breaking curses and fairy stories. But perhaps it’s important to remember that the people under curses in those stories are not that way by accident. Punishment is often deserved.”

“What the hell could you have done to deserve this?”

“I have made a terrible mistake,” Kris replied, voice weary. “It was wrong for me to... ingratiate myself to you as I have, regardless of my own personal feelings. To urge you to discover the secrets of the manor. Instead, I should have been helping you figure out a way to outsmart Garrick from day

one. If you wish to discuss these things, I will be in my chambers. Until then, I suggest that we invest ourselves in a more...distant form of relationship.”

“Distant? I don’t understand—”

But apparently, I wasn’t meant to. Before I could finish that sentence, Kris had turned from me and began walking to the door. I felt my jaw tighten, my hands clench into fists.

Damn you, Kris! For the first time since setting foot on the shores of Kelvia, I had thought that I might have found a friend. Sure, a large, furry, somewhat unconventional friend, but a *friend*, nevertheless. And it was clear that he felt the same way too.

I glared at him as he walked to the door, ready to give him a piece of my mind. If he was just gonna *throw* me away like a piece of garbage, then...

I blinked, surprised, to find tears in my eyes, and froze. Where were these strong emotions coming from? I had only known Kris for a few weeks! And sure, I had grown awfully fond of the big lug but...

As I watched Kris’s retreating back, I could only think of Martin stepping out of my house, our home, of his own free will. The click of the door shutting behind him tearing out my heart and leaving nothing but a gaping hole behind. A hole that would never be filled again.

The door shut behind Kris, and I flinched.

Well, I guess I had grown fonder of our chats than I had realized.

The Mother's Moon

Rose

I can hear him growling outside of my door, as if begging to be brought in. But I will not. I know that I have made a mistake, and must be punished for it, but this wolf at my door is too much.

“Dammit!” I hissed.

My mind was in a million places at once. I dropped Susannah’s letter on the counter, turning my attention to my half-charred supper. I moved the skillet from the heat and let out a long sigh.

I was tempted just to throw the whole thing to the pigs—or the garbage can, given that the manor didn’t have pigs. The cabinet food vanished seconds after it was thrown away, completing its cycle from nothing back to nothing. Kinda of made me wonder what the hell I had been digesting all this time.

I didn’t have time to make anything else. Nighttime was fast approaching, and the Mother’s Moon would hang in full over us before I knew it. The same moon that Kris had told me to run away from.

And Garrick, as if sensing the truth, had doubled his patrols.

I scowled. Of course, they hadn’t “sensed” anything. They knew what was going on just like Susannah had in those damn letters. I turned back to the stack I had brought with me into the kitchen and paused. Sure, the one I had just read had been pretty typical for her, talking about missing her family and fearing Kris. The one beneath it was a little different.

Dearest Edwin...

The name was enough to draw me in, my eyes immediately scanning to the next few lines.

You must think it selfish for me to write to you, as I promised no communication until you reached out to me. But it has been almost a year since we last spoke, and these letters never make

it past my valise. Edwin, where are you? You said you needed a couple of months to work things out with your wife, but almost a year has passed. I wear your silver ring each day, the promises we made still ringing in my ears...

“Dammit, girl, no,” I whispered.

And then caught sight of the darkened sky out the window.

Shoot. I gathered up Susannah’s letters and spun toward the door.

I felt my pace quicken as I made my way down the hall. How had it gotten dark so quickly? According to Kris’s almanac, I had a full half-hour before the sun was supposed to set. Nervous energy rattled inside of me. I turned a corner and—

The laughter of children filled the air, which was nothing new by now. I didn’t jerk in surprise like I once had, although my pace did slow. Next would come ghostly footsteps.

I froze as the steps pivoted my way, only this time they were attached to *very real children*.

It was a small girl, probably around six, being chased by a boy who looked no older than eleven. They laughed as they ran.

“Ilsa!” The little girl cried. “Ilsa!”

And then before I could figure out who this damn Ilsa was, the children turned the corner, and their voices ceased. For a mad second, I was tempted to follow, ask them what the hell they were doing here. But my time was running short, so I headed straight toward my room. Only when I opened the door, I found myself in the library.

Fear hit me like a fist to the gut, freezing me in place. I let out a curse. Whatever happened in the manor on the night of the full moon, it had already started.

I was in trouble.

The grandfather clock began to chime, and everything in front of me changed. The library shelves were filled with books. Sunlight streamed through the windows, filling the house with a warmth I didn’t know the old place could muster. Seated behind that piano was a boy, his fingers dancing across the keys, producing a melody so intricate that I felt my jaw drop. The boy—almost a man, really—spread his lips into a serene smile. He paused to scratch behind the ears of a small black cat that slept on top of the instrument.

“Beautiful,” I heard a woman’s voice say.

And then I blinked again to find the library ghostlike and bare.

Leaving me stranded on the other side of the house without Martin’s musket to defend me.

Damn. I moved toward the door, my cozy little room a strong image in my mind. I wasn't a ninny. I knew it probably would have been easier for me to hole up in one of these rooms. The furniture could barricade the door just as well as mine. But I couldn't forget Kris's warning. I needed to get as far away from him as possible.

As if to prove my point, a howl cut through the air, sending all my hairs on end.

I reached the library door. It flew open as I approached the darkened hallway on the other side.

Only when I crossed the threshold, I ended up in a completely different place again. The house of glass, which had seemed so cheerful by day, was nothing but shadows at night.

Then a light flared up in front of me. Don't get me wrong. It was nothing like the sunlight that had been in the library. No, this one came from the workbench.

I stepped around the potted plants to see a young man sitting next to a lantern. Several glasses filled with strange colored liquid surrounded him, and he paused in his careful note-taking to reach for one. He raised it up to the light, giving me a better look at his face. It was the same boy that I had seen at the piano, albeit a few years older, putting him in his mid-twenties. In fact, if I wasn't simply seeing the same man at different points in his life, including the boy in the hallway, I'd eat my hat.

"Are we done yet?"

The voice that spoke was familiar, yet different—haughty, and commanding. I couldn't help but flinch at it. I wasn't alone. The man did the same, the jar jerking in his hand. He froze as a trickle of liquid dripped over the side of the glass and down the front. With a swallow, he lowered the jar to the workbench and reached for a handkerchief—made of high-quality linen—tucked in his shirt pocket. With steady hands, he carefully wiped the drip away.

"Magician?" The harsh voice was so close I could have sworn the speaker stood right next to me. But when I looked, there was no one there.

"Y-es," the young man stammered. "This concoction should increase your men's stamina and maintain their energy levels for a full twenty-four hours. Of course, they will need a full day to recover—"

Heavy footsteps began next to me, making a beeline toward the man at the bench. Once they hit the cone of light that surrounded the workbench, a *second* man materialized, dressed in a fine red coat.

I watched as he reached out to the first man, grabbed him by the back of the neck, and slammed his head against the wooden surface of the workbench. The noise echoed throughout the room, followed by the quickening of the magician's breath.

“A full day to recover,” the man in red said. “I told you I wanted you to increase their stamina so they wouldn’t need to take so many damn breaks! This doesn’t solve the problem at all.”

“Exhaustion is a normal state,” the magician said, his voice half-muffled by the workbench. “You can delay it, but ultimately the body has to cycle back to it.”

“If I wanted to be a slave to the cycles, I wouldn’t require you.”

The man’s lips spread into a sneer, and I jerked in surprise. Despite the difference in expression, that face was almost identical to the magician who sat at the workbench. Brothers, I realized with a blink. No, twins.

I needed to get the hell out of here.

I spun to the door and pulled, but it didn’t budge. Letting out a curse, I yanked harder. The door jerked open, and I barreled through, ending up not in the hallway, but back in my rooms of all places.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice half breathy at the familiar sight. I shut the door and then leaned against it. My body shook from nerves. I closed my eyes, eager to stop my heart from racing, my—

And then I heard it, a low, soft hum, accompanied by a steady, rhythmic creaking.

My breath caught in my throat, and my eyes flew open. I turned to the source, the rocking chair by the window, where I had spent hours poring over the Almanac, or Susannah’s letters.

Only this time, someone else sat in it.

The woman was far from young, but she wasn’t what I’d call “old.” Her brown hair, streaked with gray, shone in the candlelight. Her hands worked steadily, a pair of knitting needles wedged between them, working on what looked like a half-finished sock. Her dress was a washed-out blue and homespun, nothing like the red coat the angry man had worn.

I tried to focus on these things, the rugged and approachable, instead of the long slash that marred her face. The blood that poured from it.

She seemed to be ignoring it just fine. Instead, she rocked that chair of hers back and forth, her fingers steadily working on her handiwork. As she caught sight of me, those white eyes of hers met mine. She smiled a motion that sent a drop of blood sliding down her face and onto the floor.

At that, I turned right back around. Only the door was gone! Instead, I was met with a blank wall as if someone had reached down and snatched my exit away.

But not my only one.

I turned to where that glorious powder room was, and dashed for the doorway, picking up Martin’s musket as I passed. It wasn’t loaded, but I could take care of that right quick if only I could get in a room that wasn’t trying to—

I pushed opened the door, and the floor lurched beneath me, throwing me forward into a darkened room. I landed on something solid, and not all that comfortable.

And then I felt it move.

I blinked to find that I had landed on the same young man that I'd been running into all over the damn place. Only now, he was a little less young, probably around my own thirty years. Time had not been kind to him. His clothing looked like rags. His hair was overgrown, and a patchy beard marred an otherwise handsome face. But unlike the previous versions of himself, who had done a great job of ignoring me, his eyes met mine, and they widened.

"Rose," he said, his voice a tremble. "What are you doing here?"

"Well." My cheeks colored as I pushed away from him. "This isn't a washroom."

The door behind us slammed shut, leaving us in almost complete darkness.

"What are you doing here?" I heard the man hiss again. "I thought I told you—"

"You're acting awfully familiar for someone I just met today," I snapped back.

"Keep your voice—"

"Don't tell me what to do with my damn voice!"

"Rose," he said. "I apologize, but it's not safe."

It was the damn apology that did it. His politeness never wavered, even though the two of us had just been in a somewhat scandalous position for a man and woman not bonded in marriage. His soft, calm demeanor chased all my anger away.

"Kris?" I asked, my voice falling to a whisper. "Is that you?"

"Yes," he said. "In more ways than one."

A low growl could be heard from across the room. Shit! I reached for the gunpowder and shot. Damn good that would do me. I couldn't load a musket in the dark.

The manor, as if in response to my thoughts, turned on the lights. The room filled with a faint amber glow.

We were in Kris's chambers, and everything was the same, except for the fact that Kris was not *Kris*. He stared at me, half sitting, half lying on the floor, his eyes (had they always been such a nice shade of blue?) as wide as saucers. I could feel my heart thunder in my chest and wondered if he was doing the same.

And then I picked up on low, steady breathing.

"What is that?" I said, mouthing the words rather than speaking them aloud.

Kris swallowed. He licked his lips before speaking.

“Me,” he mouthed back.

I blinked at him in response, and then the breathing was broken by a gruff growl. I snapped my head toward it to see a large and furry shape next to the bed.

“Divine Mother,” I cursed, reaching for the musket.

“You need to get out of here,” Kris hissed.

“Damn house will probably just put me back here,” I murmured, as I tipped the shot into the musket. A couple of the musket balls clattered to the floor.

“Shit,” I said, running through the steps that Martin had drilled into me five years ago. Across the room, I saw the beast shift.

“Rose,” Kris hissed again. “It will kill—”

The beast pushed himself to its feet, and I found myself remembering how Kris usually walked with a stoop, because that thing seemed to damn near fill the room with all his height. His red eyes glowed, his claws flexing. As it turned to me, and I placed the butt of the musket to my shoulder.

And then I pulled the trigger.

Bang! The shot hit him in the shoulder. The beast jerked back and let out a moan that was, strangely enough, echoed by Kris. I looked down to see him leaning forward, his left hand pressed against his own shoulder, sweat breaking out over his face.

“Do it again,” he said.

Before I could even think to tell him that it took a little longer than that for me to load a musket, the beast let out a high-pitched howl and pulled itself up to full height again.

“No time for that now,” I said, reaching for Kris’s arm. He let out a cry as I yanked him forward and pulled him to the now-opened doorway. I plunged ahead, figuring that whatever was on the other side had to be better than that. The door shut behind us, leaving us in near silence, beyond Kris’s heavy breathing.

For a second, all I could do was press my face against the shut door, terrified at what might be behind me. I tightened my grip on Martin’s musket, knowing what a fool I was. Just because I couldn’t see something didn’t mean it couldn’t hurt me.

Or worse.

“What’s going on?” I turned my head toward Kris.

It was then that I noticed that something was very wrong. Sure, he had been a mess before, but this was worse. His face was slick with sweat, and red, as vibrant as any rose, blossomed through his white shirt near his right shoulder.

“Shit,” I said. “Kris, I—”

“No,” he said, half wheezing from the pain. “This is good.”

The Beast

Kris

I remembered the moment the musket went off, the thunderous blow of the gun, the way the beast had jerked back, the wave of pain in my own shoulder, and the shock that followed it. The beast was hurt. By the cycles, Rose had managed to *injure* it.

And if the wound on my shoulder was any indication, she had hurt me too.

I stumbled backward, bumping into something at about hip height. Slumping to the floor, I watched as lights danced in front of my eyes, causing me to blink several times. Where was I?

My vision cleared, answering my question instantly. Of course, we would have ended up in my workshop.

Rose fell to her knees. In her right hand, she held the musket. With her left, she reached for me.

“What do you mean good?” She shook her head. “Divine Mother, you’re bleedin’!”

Her Verdian accent seemed enhanced by the stress of the situation, pulling me out of my spiral of pain. Instead, I looked to her, focusing on those green eyes. Reaching out with my uninjured arm, I rested a hand on her shoulder. Though part of me balked at the imposition, a more significant portion realized that I needed something to anchor me, to keep me from passing out.

And Rose needed answers.

“The beast and I are connected, even when we’re separated such as this,” I replied, my voice half breathless. “Any injuries done to it are reflected in me.”

“What?” Rose drew back. “Then I should have never shot it! Why didn’t you—”

“I didn’t know the level of damage you would be able to impart. And even if I had, it still would have been worth it.”

Rose opened her mouth to speak, then closed it as a howl cut through the air.

“How close was that?” she asked, turning to the noise.

“My hearing in this form is far less precise. But it appears to have made its way to the servants’ quarters. Still, it will continue to search until it finds us. It would be prudent of you to leave me here.”

Where perhaps, I would have the fortune of bleeding out on the floor.

“What?” Her head snapped toward mine. “I’m not leaving you!”

Instead, she placed the musket against the workbench and turned back to the door. She took two purposeful steps toward the table next to it and began to haul it toward the threshold.

“What would be the purpose in that, Rose?” I asked with a sigh. “If you are strong enough to move it, then the beast surely is.”

“Then I’ll make a pile,” Rose said, voice half-drowned out by the screech of wood against the floor. Once the table was in place, she turned to the largest potted plant.

“What’s happening, Kris? I *know* there are questions you can’t answer—”

“Actually, tonight I may be able to answer some.” I nodded to the glass walls. “It’s the Mother’s Moon. When magic is the most unstable. We may have some leeway.”

“Okay.” She paused to run her hands through her hair. “Okay, okay.”

“What do you wish to know?”

She turned to me before speaking. “The connection. Why does hurting *it* also hurt you?”

My gaze dropped. “Because *it* is *me*. The monster inside. Even separated like this, the connection still exists. It will do everything in its power to find me and...rectify that separation.”

“So, you *are* cursed? Under a spell?”

Another howl cut through the air, but was this one closer? My gaze darted toward the barricaded door.

“Rose, you must leave,” I said.

“Not until you give me answers!”

“Maybe once I’ve told you my story, you’ll feel less determined to help.” I let out a sigh. “Do you know how long I’ve been here?”

“You told me a little over a year, but I’ve seen a past version of you. As a child even, playing with a little girl.”

The unexpected mention of Rebecca caused a lump to form in my throat. I swallowed, then spoke again.

“My reply to your initial question was misleading, and for that, I apologize,” I said. “It is true that I have spent the last year of my life here, trapped within the form of the beast. But I spent the first twenty-nine of them in a much different form.”

“You grew up here! But the villagers never mentioned anything about this place.” She paused. “Not that they talked to me all that much.”

“My family has had agreements with the village of Farrow for much longer than the current... arrangement. Every year they would report their requirements in turn for their silence. If those requirements were modest—a certain amount of livestock, for example—they would not meet much resistance.”

“But why?”

I opened my mouth to reply, to say the words that I too had kept secret for almost thirty years, only to find myself in a familiar situation. My throat closed, the words instantly slipping from my brain.

“Damn,” I said. “It looks like there are some things that I still must keep to myself.”

“The manor?” Rose asked.

“You would be correct.”

“Well, shit.” Rose gritted her teeth. “Then what *can* you tell me?”

“That my family was forced to keep my existence a secret. So, they turned to Rosewood Manor, which, given its remote location, had seen very little use over generations. They hired on a small staff: a cook, maids, a butler, and of course, my caretaker, a kindly woman named Ilsa.”

I felt my throat close for a very different reason. But once again, I pushed past it.

“I grew up mostly in isolation, although my family did visit once a year.”

“Including a younger sister?”

“Yes.” I paused. “I always looked forward to her visits.”

“Phew,” Rose said. “I’m sorry, but growing up surrounded by servants, waiting on you hand and foot? I’m kinda surprised that you’re not...a little more...”

“Imperious?”

“I was gonna say ‘an asshole.’”

I chuckled. “Ilsa was not a woman to be trifled with. She did her best to keep me humble and give me as full of a life as possible. I constantly read, and, being somewhat nimble of finger, turned to music. The piano in the library was brought in for me. And when I became bored with that, I turned to magic.”

My gaze drifted to the nearby table.

"I tackled magic with the same level of voraciousness that had consumed me with music and reading. They even built this greenhouse, so I was never low on supplies. Once I had completed all the spells in the library, I began to experiment, much as you mentioned doing with your recipes."

A smile twitched on Rose's lips. "You know, the two don't seem all that different."

"Based on our conversations, I find myself wondering if some of the housewives in the village have the potential to become some of the most talented magicians in Kelvia. Magic was a wonderful challenge, allowing me to push myself beyond the limits of what was technically safe. I could tell that power was building up in the walls, and that the manor itself was slowly awakening. Still, I selfishly ignored the problem, saying that I could always use the leftover magic later. But in actuality, I was creating a friend, albeit an unusual one."

"It doesn't seem all that friendly now."

My lips twisted downward. "Blame that on the war. My...talents could not be kept a secret from the new king, and I soon found myself pressed into His Majesty's service."

She shivered. "Shoot. That must have been terrible."

"Eventually. In the beginning, I was a willing participant."

"What?" She drew back.

"Rose, I am sympathetic to your plight as a Verdian, but I am also Kelvian. To me, I was merely serving my country. Being useful. And in the beginning, my offerings were small. Stimulants to keep soldiers alert and awake so they could fight for longer stretches of time. Explosives that could be detonated from afar, leaving our men unharmed. But the king always wanted more. More magic, more destruction. From here, I could resist...in a way. Drag my heels. But eventually, he caught on. Soldiers came in the night and took me away from the only home I'd ever known. The manor, now fully sentient, took a few of them, but they ultimately overpowered me." I shook my head. "Magic, for all of its strengths, is not something that can be performed on a whim."

"I spent the next four years of my life in the capital. For the first time I could recall, magic was no longer a source of joy. I was responsible for everything horrible about the war. The stimulants I designed to allow our soldiers to stay awake longer eventually transformed them into beasts, albeit somewhat less permanently than my situation."

"I became so disgusted with myself. This was no longer about serving my country. This was about serving a monster. But whenever I tried to pull away, he pushed for more. Almost as if...he *liked* it."

"Did you try and escape?"

I swallowed, remembering that cold, dark room in the dungeons of the castle, windowless, to prevent anyone from the knowledge of my existence. I remember mustering up the courage to rebel, to rush the guards, to risk injury, anything that would get me outside of the castle walls. And how that all would melt away the moment I heard the king's footsteps as he traveled down the stairway toward my prison.

"Not hard enough," I replied.

I shifted in my place and felt a wave of dizziness. The blood loss was clearly beginning to catch up with me.

I heard another howl. Rose jumped to her feet.

"That one was way too close." She reached for the musket.

"The door." I nodded toward the other exit.

"Right," she said, reaching down to help me up.

"Rose," I began, then stopped as another wave of dizziness hit me.

"Oh, don't you dare go all 'leave me here! Save yourself' now." Her lips pressed into a determined frown as we made our way toward the glass door.

"It's more complicated..."

Rose reached out for the handle and yanked it open. I watched as the night's cool breeze pushed her hair away from her lovely, determined face.

What had I done to deserve such assistance?

She took a step forward and passed through the door unharmed, but for me, it was like slamming up against an invisible wall. I lost my grip on her and fell to the ground, just shy of the threshold.

"What's..." she began.

"I can't leave Rosewood Manor," I replied. "It's part of my curse."

"Bullshit," Rose shot back. "You've been down to the garden dozens of times."

"The greenhouse was not originally part of Rosewood Manor. It comes up right to the edge of the property line."

Bang! The greenhouse shook as something powerful threw itself against the door Rose had so dutifully barricaded. I felt a sinking feeling in my gut.

I licked my lips before speaking. "You need to go. I don't want you to see this."

"See what? Kris, I don't understand what's going on!"

Bang! It threw itself against the door again, this time with enough force to move the table back a couple of inches. One of the pots crashed to the floor.

"It's another part of my curse," I said. "The king wasn't The Butcher of the war, *I* was. If it hadn't been for me, things wouldn't have gone on for so long. And every full moon..."

I let my voice trail off.

"What happens, Kris? What happens?"

"I pay for it."

The door behind me burst open, and the beast tore through the greenhouse, pushing tables and chairs aside, smashing the potted plants, forcing his way toward me.

I couldn't help it. I raised my hand to protect my face as it grew near, a coward to the end. But I still felt every ounce of pain as its jaws dug into my flesh.

Rose let out a scream, and, thank the Divine Pair, turned away, racing into the woods once my fate became apparent. I watched her for as long as I could. Hoping, against all hope, that I had convinced her to leave.

After that, there was only pain.

The Grove

Rose

I ran from Rosewood Manor, hands gripped around the useless musket. Tears streamed from my eyes, blurring my vision. Probably why I didn't see that stupid root until it was too late. Before I knew what was happening, I had tripped, landing in a tangled pile of limbs on the forest floor. I let out one ragged sob, muffled by the dry leaves and grass.

How had everything changed so much in so little time? I had thought that I'd finally figured out Kris between the things I had pieced together and the pictures the manor had shown me. But to learn that he was behind the *war*? Responsible for the Butcher's magic?

And then I heard Kris let out a scream of pain as that...that *beast* tore into him, and I swear, I felt a twist in my own chest. I grabbed at the front of my dress, bunching up the fabric in my fist.

For all the good it didn't do.

I had to help him. Had to stop those cries or I swear, the next one would send my heart splitting in two.

I used Martin's musket to push me to my feet, then let out a sharp yip as pain shot through my right ankle.

Oh no...

"Turned it when you fell, did you?" a familiar voice said. "You should have expected it, running through the dark."

I felt my breath catch in my throat, and my blood turned to ice. Eyes wide, I looked up to see Martin, standing not ten feet away from me. He was dressed as if heading off for war again. Most women in West Ridge had found the sight of a man in uniform to be handsome. I had only seen death.

In my flight, I had stumbled into a grove, a break in the trees lit by the Mother's Moon. It illuminated every fold in that blue uniform and the slick of red that lay over his heart.

At least I knew that the men from West Ridge had been honest with me. That he had gone down easily.

"How are you...." My gaze fell to the musket, now holding much of my weight.

"A soul cannot truly rest until his body has been returned to his place of birth," Martin recited, "or, at least, his arms."

"I tried," I said, "Darling, I swear—"

"Oh, I know. Been following you for close to a year now. I saw how you went to my mother's house. How you tried. Just not that hard."

"W-what? I c-crossed an ocean for you!"

"And I died for your country." Martin's voice was flat.

"I never wanted that!"

"No. You didn't want me to leave at all. Still don't want me to, it seems." He nodded toward the musket.

"That's not fair. You know me. I had every intention of going back to your mother's house once my head was cool. Only I got caught up in all this!"

"Right." He stepped away from the tree and began to walk across the grove. "Trapped in an enchanted manor with a hideous beast. I should feel insulted. I never took you as the type of person who would throw herself at the first available man, especially when he's not even *human*."

"Throw myself? What are you trying to—"

"I know you, Rose," he said. "And I know your nature. You're not the type of person to turn away a creature in pain. But to try and go back into that house after the horrors you've seen? You have *feelings* for him. That *beast*." His face scrunched up in disgust.

Feelings? Did I? I thought back on my encounters with Kris. On how he had helped me with the garden. When we had laughed over meals. In his unflinching politeness, and how much I had enjoyed teasing him. It hadn't begun the normal way, of course, with a flash of a handsome smile, or a heated gaze across the room. But over our weeks together, a warmth had grown from it.

One of the things that my marriage with Martin had taught me was while heated gazes and handsome smiles were awful nice, they were ultimately shallow things.

Affection ran far deeper.

"I thought you loved me," Martin said, his words cutting through my thoughts.

“I...of course I love you! What is this? You were never the jealous type in life.”

“Well, death has a way of messing with you. I wasn’t meant to linger this long. It’s one thing to say good-bye to your loved ones as they prepare for your funeral, but this is too much. The cycle needs to complete itself, and as long as you have that.” He nodded toward the musket. “Then, I’m trapped here.”

I paused before speaking again. “If you’ve been here the whole time, then why can I only see you now?”

“It’s the magic of the manor.” He shrugged. “You’ve been there long enough for it to start to stick to you. To start showing you what you want to see.”

“Like you.”

But the words rang hollow. It was true. The day his mother had turned me away from her doorstep, I would have done anything to see Martin, even angry, jealous Martin. But in the weeks since then, something had changed. Yes, I still mourned him, and I missed him so much that it hurt, but he was no longer my center. No longer the only thing that pushed me forward.

“Martin,” I said, voice steady. “I promise, I will find a way to return your arms and set you to rest, no matter what it takes. That hasn’t changed.”

“But you have,” he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

“A woman can’t lose the love of her life and expect it *not* to change her. You are my brave soldier, the echo of my heartbeat, and the first man I ever loved. That will always be with me. But you’re dead, and I’m alive. And that may not be fair, but it’s the truth. And that’s something I need to accept.”

I looked up to meet Martin’s eyes only to find them...unreadable. Just like at the beginning of our relationship. He had been so closed off, so uncomfortable with his own emotions, his love for me. Over the years we had spent together in courtship and marriage, I had slowly peeled away all these walls, and he had become mine.

But he wasn’t. Not anymore.

“I will find a way to set you to rest, I promise,” I said.

Martin looked dubious at first, but eventually, he nodded.

“I...hope to see you again,” he said, voice hesitant. “When I cycle back around.”

“I’ll probably be an old lady by then,” I chuckled. “But yes, I hope the Father grants us that much.”

Life's all about cycles, after all. Day to night then day again. Life to death then life again. And for Kris, that meant from monster to human and back again. But I had seen the boy in the hallway. The young man at the piano. The gardening beast. I knew that, despite his appearance, there was nothing monstrous about him. He had to cycle back to humanity eventually.

The question was, how?

Thanks to my ankle, I didn't have the strength to bring myself back to the manor that night. Instead, I rested my head against a nearby tree and let myself doze, knowing what would eventually come for me.

"Er...Miss Rose?"

"It's Madam if the person's been married, Kal," I said, not even bothering to open my eyes.

"Sorry," he said.

The regret was so obvious in his voice that I couldn't stop a smile from twitching onto my lips.

"It's okay," I said.

I opened my eyes to see the boy standing in front of me. Kal, his eyes all big and astonished. It made him look so young.

Which, I suppose, he was.

"Madam Rose, what are you doing out here?" He asked. "Why didn't you..."

"Keep on going?" I finished.

"Well, yeah."

"Strangely enough, I have work here to do. That, and my ankle is sprained."

"Are you okay?"

"All things considered, yeah. I've got a dilemma in front of me. I wanna help Kris, figure out how to break the curse, turn him human again, but I don't know a damn thing about magic. That, and the longer he remains this way, the more people get hurt. If it hadn't been for that, your sister would still be alive."

"Um...Susannah isn't dead."

I blinked. "What? But you said she was gone?"

"That's because she ran away," Kal replied. "I mean...for a few weeks we thought she might be dead. The roads aren't safe at night, you know. But she managed to meet up with a traveling farmer. Sent us a letter from the capital last week." He reached back and scratched his head. "Course, my parents want me to act as if she's been killed."

My deepest regrets...I hope I can earn your forgiveness.

“Why is that, Kal?” I asked with a frown.

“I dunno,” the boy said. “All I know is she was spending all this time around Headman Garrick, and when Mama and Papa found out, they got real mad for some reason. It’s weird. I mean, he *is* the headman, after all.”

I felt the final piece fall into place, the last letter I had found. The truth behind this “Edwin.”

Poor girl...

“Well, Kal,” I said, “as much as I’d like to ask you to help me back to the manor, I’m not one of your delicate Kelvian ladies. I think I may be too much for you.”

“I’ll get someone,” Kal said with a nod, and then ran out of sight.

“I’m sure you will.” I let out a sigh.

True to his word, not ten minutes later, Kal had returned with Headman Garrick by his side. For a moment, I remembered what it had been like to see him for the first time. Broad shoulders, and hair as pale as wheat. From a distance, he had looked just like my Martin.

Didn’t act much like him.

“My rescuer,” I said, unable to keep the disdain out of my voice.

Garrick paused before speaking. “Madam Gardner.”

“Headman,” I spat out.

“I must admit. I’m surprised you didn’t try to crawl out of here.”

“And why would I do that?” I crossed my arms in front of my chest. When the headman didn’t answer, I continued. “You knew all about that, of course. Thanks for kindly filling me in on what I was signing up for.”

Annoyance flicked over the headman’s typically bland face. “Do you want my help or not?”

“I suppose I have no choice, now, *Edwin*.”

He gave me a cross look, then reached out and helped me to my feet. I leaned on him for support, and he shifted uncomfortably in response.

“What? A little too close?”

“Trust me, this is not a position I relish to be in. I’m a married man, after all.”

“That didn’t stop you with Susannah.”

The headman stiffened in response.

“I suppose you just couldn’t help yourself. From the letters she left behind, she seemed like a sweet kid, the type of girl that just wanted to make everyone happy. I bet she was pretty too. Pretty enough to make you overlook the fact that she was...what? Fourteen? Fifteen? Or maybe that was the draw.”

“You don’t know—” Garrick began.

“I can only imagine the scandal that would have caused. The village headman caught seducing a young girl?”

“She wasn’t as innocent as—”

“She was a *child*, headman! And you’re sure as hell not. Where I came from that would get a man jailed. Maybe even castrated. But here...you just made her go away. Took a girl that thought she was in love with you and locked her in a castle with a beast. And to think, for a minute, I thought I might understand you.”

That got a reaction out of him. The headman paused for just a second, causing me to half stumble.

“Kris told you why you made that bargain to send a caretaker to Rosewood Manor. As far as numbers go, it must have made sense at the time. The war was terrible on all sides. If someone had come to my village with the promise to make it all go away, I don’t know if I could have said no, even though it reeked of human sacrifice. But you didn’t do it for that. You just did it to hide your mistress.”

And with that, Garrick pushed me away. I stumbled, putting too much weight on that swollen ankle of mine, and let out a cry before falling to the ground.

“You think you’re so smart,” he said. “But you’re just a stupid, willful Verdian woman. You come to our village and immediately start making demands—”

“I don’t see why asking directions to my in-laws’ house would be considered ‘making demands!’”

“Been nothing but a thorn in my side since then. If you weren’t the caretaker, then I’d...”

He tightened his grip on Martin’s musket, and I had no doubt in my mind that he knew how to use it.

Don’t push him, Rose, the smarter side of me said.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the part of me who spoke up.

“What? You gonna shoot me now? Sacrifice another woman that got in your way? Because that’s what you almost did to Susannah, you know. Trapped her in a cursed manor with a beast that goes *murderous* once a month. You might have been too much of a coward to put the gun to her head yourself but—”

And with that, he swung the musket up and pointed it directly to my face, and I felt my breath freeze in my chest. Stupid, *stupid* Rose. None of the sweetness and all the thorns. And if the way he held the gun was any indication, he was just as confident with it as my Martin had been.

My Martin, who wasn't here to protect me now.

Garrick's eyes were filled with fury as he stared down the barrel of the gun. I could see the moment, the very moment, that he decided to pull that trigger, damning me to wander the earth as a spirit.

Leaving no one behind to help Kris.

And then his body jerked and fell forward to the ground with a thump. I blinked, looking up and finding not Martin, or even Kris, but a very different man.

He reminded me of Amar, and it wasn't just because he was Hijanni. No, this man had the same strength to his spine and hawk-like golden eyes. And just like a bird of prey, he wasn't without weapons. I watched as he took the sword he had used to knock out Headman Garrick, and sheathed it at his side.

"Are you the caretaker?" he asked.

The Fallen

Kris

It had taken me a full hour to drag myself from the greenhouse to my blessedly dark room. I ignored the blood that dripped on the carpet as I passed. The manor would take care of it, bringing things back to how they had been the day that I returned, still growing used to my beastly shape.

I pulled myself into the bed with a wince and began sorting through the mess of memories I had acquired the night before. The greenhouse. I had ended up in the greenhouse somehow. And Rose...

I froze. What had happened to Rose?

“There’s a good chance you killed her, you know. Like me.”

I looked up to see Susannah, perched on the edge of the bed, eyes pointed toward me in a glare. And then her words hit home.

Rose? Kill Rose? I searched through my memories from the night before. She had ended up here somehow...

A memory came to my mind. Of Rose, standing in front of the door, her musket pointed straight at me. I recalled the blast of the weapon, the scent of gunpowder, and sudden pain in my shoulder. That’s right. She had shot me, had done more damage with that gun than anyone had ever managed to accomplish. But that hadn’t been enough to—

“Kris?”

I didn’t recognize the voice at first. It was usually filled with such strength. To hear it, so small, barely above a whisper.

It was why when I turned to meet her gaze, I felt my heart leap into my throat.

Rose was lit by the faintest rays of sunlight, creeping through the gap between the shutters. She lay on her stomach, her right arm reaching for me. Her face—her beautiful face—was covered in scratches. And beneath her, a pool of blood.

“Rose!”

I didn’t care that it hurt, I barely felt the pain that ripped through me as I leaped across the room and fell to my knees next to her. Now that I was close, I could see that her eyes were wide, her mouth opening and shutting like a fish on land. The reason why immediately became apparent. Her throat had been cut, just like Susannah’s had. Just like—

“Oh, Divine Mother,” I cursed. “Rose, I—”

I reached for her, my damned claws cutting through the fabric of her dress before I had the sense to pull back. I couldn’t risk hurting her further.

“You...*did* this to me,” she said.

I raced through the confusion of memories. Of sitting in the greenhouse with Rose. But no...that had been a week ago. When I had realized what her fate would be if she chose to stay.

“I fed you,” she said. “Talked to you. Hell, I *liked* you.” Her gaze hardened. “And you did *this*?” Her voice was cut off by a series of coughs.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I tried to warn you but the manor—”

“I thought we were *friends*.”

A sob broke through her voice, and I felt something in me shatter. *Were* we friends? It had been so long since I had met anyone I could truly call that. Not since Ilsa. Even my sister hadn’t counted. With Rose, had I finally...

“Found someone?” Susannah finished my thought for me, her voice high and mocking. “Why bother when you know how that ends. If you had really cared about her, you would have convinced her to leave. Never mind trying to make friends. The moment she first walked through that door, you should have turned from her and refused to speak. And because you didn’t, she’s dead.”

“What? No! I—”

But she was right, when I looked down at Rose next, her body was still, eyes opened as she faced her own death. It was impossible not to think of how she had looked the month before, lit by that lantern. How the sight of her first stepping into my room had filled me with wariness, but also relief. To be finally released from loneliness and isolation.

To not be alone.

“Oh Kris, you’re not alone.”

I blinked, forcing my head to look up to see Susannah looking surprisingly sympathetic.

“The truth is obvious,” she said. “It’s not safe for others to be around you. You bring nothing but death and pain. But some of us can’t feel pain.”

A duo of beastly soldiers, who had spent the entirety of our conversation lingering around the edges, began to draw close.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, shaking my head.

“You’re supposed to be smart. Well, just book-smart, I guess.” She paused, kneeling next to me, reaching out a hand. “I know that the last thing in life you’ve ever wanted to cause others was pain. But that doesn’t change the truth. You are a monster, Kris. Even before you looked like one.”

“Yes,” I said slowly. “The magic, the war...”

She was entirely right, of course. Only, there was something about her words that were slightly off.

“You’re caught up in a cycle,” she continued. “With Ilsa, me, Rose. But there is a way you can break out of it, I know.”

“How?” I asked, voice hoarse.

She stood tall and reached out for me. And although my body screamed in protest, I allowed myself to be helped to my feet.

“This way.” A strange smile spread across her face.

With that, she led me to the door, which opened with a creak, some of the magic of The Mother’s Moon still lingering.

And in the back of my mind, I could hear voices. Of Rose, telling me how the doors had led her to the wrong rooms last night. Or of myself. Every book I had ever picked up warned about trusting magic like this.

Only now, I found I didn’t care.

Instead, I let Susannah lead me through the door.

The Visitor

Rose

“Who the hell are you?”

The Hijanni swordsman raised a single eyebrow then glanced down at the unconscious Garrick. I winced. That probably wasn’t the nicest way to greet the person who had just saved my life.

“Sorry,” I said with a sigh. “Just...long night.”

“Clearly. Are you injured?”

“Ah...my ankle.”

“Well then,” he replied stiffly. “It is my duty to assist you.”

Well, wasn’t *that* pleasant? But in all fairness, it wasn’t like I was in that cheerful of a mood either.

Like with Garrick, I had to lean on him for support. Unlike Garrick, he didn’t make me feel like a harlot for daring to be injured. I took a closer look at my rescuer. His leather armor was a deep red, as was the scabbard for his sword.

It was strangely old-fashioned. Not the type of weapon that had been used in the war. And his dark hair lacked the short cut that most soldiers sported. If anything, I’d call it a bit overlong. In better circumstances, I’d be itching for my scissors to set things right.

“Are you the caretaker?” he repeated.

Right. That had been his first question.

“Yes,” I said. “Not what you expected?”

“Headman Garrick sent us a letter about a month ago letting us know about the change. Said that job had been given over to some ‘spiteful, opinionated, Verdian woman.’” He let out a snort. “What

an insufferable man.”

“Well, considering you just left a big dent in the back of his head, I’m pretty sure he knows how you feel.” I paused, the swordsman’s words settling in. “Wait...why would Garrick send *you* a letter? What are you even doing here?”

He shook his head. “I’m not alone. Someone wants to meet you.”

Well, that didn’t sound ominous. We walked (well, he walked, I more hobbled) the rest of the way to the manor, and circled toward the front, where two horses stood. *Very* nice horses if my experiences with the hostlers at West Ridge were any indication, with healthy, shiny coats and top-notch gear.

But they paled in comparison to the rider.

She was every inch the classic Verdian beauty: delicate frame, fair skin, and hair so blond it almost looked white. It was currently plaited into a braid that ran down her back. Her eyes were blue, calculating.

“Okay,” I said, pushing away from the swordsman and leaning against the wall of the manor for support. “What the hell is going on?”

The lady raised an eyebrow.

The swordsman’s response was less measured.

“Show some respect!” His voice was as sharp as a whip. “You are in the presence of Rebecca, Crown Princess of Kelvia, and she—”

“Zahir,” the princess said, a sigh in her voice. “I had desired to keep my identity a secret, remember?”

Well, that was enough to shut him up. And hell, me too. I didn’t expect to meet *royalty* of all things this morning. Although with her level gaze and armed guard, there was no denying the title fit.

Although there was something about her that was almost familiar...

She slid off her horse so damn gracefully, I found myself wondering how she danced. She wore a navy gown. Simple in style, but every stitch sang of high quality.

“I have found the caretaker, your highness,” the swordsman—Zahir, she had called him—reported with a respectful nod.

“Thank you. I hope it was not too much trouble.” The princess turned her level gaze to me. “I hope I did not misunderstand your accent. You are Verdian, correct?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then you have many reasons to despise my family. Although I promise the work we do here today will do much to further forge peace between our two nations.”

I shook my head. “Well, that doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

“It is a lot, that is true,” Rebecca replied. “And I understand why you may not trust us—”

“No, not that. It’s just...Mother, I swear I’ve *seen* you before. In the manor, but as a child. But Kris said that was his sister...”

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place in my mind, and I felt my eyes widen.

“Well, shit,” I said.

“I greatly concur,” the princess replied with a sigh.

“I can only imagine how difficult it was for my parents,” Rebeca said. “To give birth, not to a firstborn son but a set of twins? They knew, of course, of the story of Kelvin and Verdis and how that had ripped apart our nation. Now, we were doomed to repeat that cycle. And that created fear.”

We stood in the library, with its half-empty shelves of books. I had thrown the shutters open to make the place less depressing, and a slight breeze blew in. Next to the door, Zahir stood. He rested a hand on his sword as if he expected an ambush of bandits at any moment.

A tad overcautious, if you asked me.

“Apparently, more than one of my father’s advisors suggested killing one of the babies. Unfortunately, as pragmatic as my late father was, the outright slaughter of one of his children was a step too far.”

“And what did the *queen* say to that?” I asked.

The princess shook her head. While speaking, she had encircled the room, pausing to rest her hand against seemingly random objects such as a book, or the piano. It didn’t take a genius to guess—this *was* her childhood home—they probably meant a lot more to her than she was letting on.

“The queen’s remarks, if she voiced them, were not written down. More likely, they were ignored altogether,” Rebecca replied, voice light. “After all, we women are fragile things, given to sentimentality, especially during emotionally vulnerable times such as childbirth. Clearly, a mother cannot be trusted to make sound judgments regarding her children.”

From the doorway, Zahir let out a snort of disgust.

“What a load of horseshit,” I said.

“A sentiment I gladly share,” Rebecca replied. “But, as you’ve probably figured out, Kris was not summarily murdered before his naming day. Instead, it was decided that he would be kept as a

replacement heir in case Carlisle did not live through the at times tumultuous periods of childhood and adolescence.”

“So, he was raised in secret at Rosewood Manor,” I finished, then paused. “He said you used to visit.”

“In late spring,” Rebecca said, tipping her head to the side. “After the roses had bloomed. It was like stepping into a fairy tale. A manor covered in beautiful flowers, and a kinder, gentler version of my brother to play with.”

“Was The Butcher that much of a monster even as a kid?”

I had learned a lot in my time here in Kelvia, including the fact that most citizens didn’t appreciate having their king called out for the monster he was. But, much like her brother, Rebecca barely batted an eye. Not that she was the most emotive person to begin with. Her expressions were carefully schooled.

“If you’re asking if he was eagerly leading a county into war for the sake of his own glory, then no. He wasn’t The Butcher yet. But that did not make him a nice child.”

“Well, he certainly wasn’t a nice man.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Not by any definition of the word. And the war...” She shook her head. “The whole affair was supposedly sparked by an insult from your king, but that was obviously an excuse. Carlisle wanted to complete the cycle, to unite our two nations by bringing Verdia under Kelvian rule. A land we never cared deeply for until the Hijanni showed us what we were missing.”

I glanced at Zahir as she spoke. His face remained blank.

“At first, Kris’s involvement was about saving the lives of our men. But the longer it went, and the more Carlisle asked for, Kris, always a kindhearted man, started to resist. And Carlisle responded in just...horrible ways.”

“What are you talking about?” I prompted when Rebecca fell silent.

“Listen,” the swordsman said, stepping forward. “If the princess doesn’t want to talk—”

He was silenced by a raised hand from Rebecca.

“Thank you, but it’s okay Zahir,” she replied. “Carlisle responded to every one of Kristoff’s infractions by hurting someone he cared about, the servants of Rosewood manor. I was mostly isolated from all this and was never sure of the extent. Still, it was enough to cow my brother back into submission.”

“Kristoff worked day and night on tweaking the beast curse, but it wasn’t fast enough for Carlisle. I am not exactly sure what happened, but one morning the guards arrived to discover that Kristoff had

taken the latest draught to turn himself into a beast. You've likely become familiar with the results. The room was filled with the bodies: a servant Kristoff was fond of, and of the king himself.

"It is why our monarch has been absent during this past year. According to the public, he was horribly injured in a magical experiment. In actuality, Carlisle has been dead for about a year. The negotiations for the cease-fire have been completed by myself and a few trusted advisors, sworn to secrecy. But this, as you might expect, will not work for the peace treaty coming up in less than a month. We need someone who can play the part of Carlisle. How fortunate that we happen to have his exact double."

"Only you don't! He's caught in the form of a beast. He doesn't look anything like the king at all."

"Ah," Rebecca and Zahir exchanged a look. "It's a bit more complicated than that."

The Butcher

Kris

I blinked at the sunlight that streamed through the kitchen windows, shocked to discover I felt no pain. The next thing that struck me was the fact that so much had changed. A mixing bowl in a different location. Fresh herbs left blooming in a window box. The tall stools Rose had discovered exchanged for study, low-backed chairs.

“This,” I said. “The kitchen hasn’t looked like this in—”

“Years?”

I jumped at the familiar voice and spun to see Ilsa standing behind me, carrying a large pan of bread in her two hands. I blinked in surprise. She looked much as she had in life, a strong, solid figure, brown hair, skin weathered from spending her time in the garden.

The only thing that looked wrong was the gaping wound that adorned her throat.

“Are you gonna make me stand here forever, boy?” she asked, voice half teasing.

“I... no.” I stepped to the side, wondering when the last time was that someone had called me “boy.”

She inched by and made her way to the stove, opening the door with one hand and balancing the heavy tray of bread with the other.

“Not quite the sweets you’re looking for, of course,” she said.

“Sweets.” I shook my head. “Ilsa, what’s going on?”

“You’ve spent the last year haunted by spirits. I’d think you’d be used to strange things happening by now.”

She nodded behind me, and I turned to see the two beastly soldiers on each side of the kitchen door as if standing guard. Before I could comment on that, a young girl dashed between them. I recognized her at once. My sister, albeit a version from long ago. She looked maybe six years old, an age before the realities of her position had begun to weigh her down.

“Now, now,” Ilsa began, “No running you...ooof!”

She let out a grunt of frustration as a second child came in, a young boy of eleven in a gold vest, white shirt, and fitted trousers. The expression on his face was something I was not used to anymore either. He was smiling.

“Kristoff, we need to have a discussion with your father, this younger sister of yours is becoming a bad influence.” She circled around the table to where Rebecca sat. “I don’t know if I’ll allow her back to my house next summer.”

Despite her jocular tone, a gasp leaped from the younger version of myself. As if sensing his discomfort, Ilsa looked across the table to where he sat and winked.

“And what would you two rapscallions be doing in my kitchen today? Shouldn’t you be outside exploring and getting into trouble like proper children?”

“Don’t be silly, Ilsa,” Rebecca said in a lightly chiding tone that was a fair imitation of our father. “Proper children don’t get into mischief.”

“The little grin on your face says otherwise. Not to mention those grass stains on your clothing! Do you know how long it will take to work them out?”

“Work them out?” Rebecca tipped her head to the side.

My sister, like most noble children, had yet to understand what servants actually did. To her, clothing came perfectly cleaned and pressed, and her bed made itself over the course of the day. Some days, I think she even forgot that the food on our table didn’t appear by magic.

“Anyway, to what do I owe the pleasure of your appearance?” Ilsa asked.

The younger version of myself dropped his gaze.

“We were playing with the ponies!” Rebecca said. “But then Carlisle had to ruin everything by wanting to ride.”

Meaning that I had to come inside. While we were reasonably confident that no one had picked up on my existence. To the village of Farrow, Rosewood Manor was just a summer abode for the royal family. But if anyone were to see us together...

It was best to avoid situations like that.

Ilsa’s face went still for a moment, then broke out into a grin.

“Well then,” she said. “I believe I have just the thing.”

She turned to a brightly colored jar on the counter behind her and pulled out one giant cookie, dotted with chocolate chips and raisins.

“Cookies!” Rebecca cried.

“Just the one left, although given that it is quite a large one.” She broke it into two perfect halves and handed one to each of us. Rebecca accepted hers silently, and for a second, I thought she (being only six and a royal at that) would protest over the indignity over having to share, but she dug in.

“This is good, Kristoff!” she said as she ate, spewing pieces of cookie across the table.

Ilsa chided her for not being ladylike, and I felt a smile tug across my face. Not the child version of me, but the grown, beastly version. I heard a shuffle by my side and looked over to see Susannah.

“Such happiness,” she said, her voice distant. “Not what I’d expect from a boy who grew up so isolated.”

“Rebecca visited every year,” I replied. “And the day she left was when I began counting down to the next visit. The servants were always so kind to me. Treated me more warmly than most help would. I believe that they felt bad for me. Me, a prince.”

The door to the kitchen slammed open so loudly that it stunned the room to silence. All three heads snapped toward the open door, where an identical copy of myself stepped inside. His face was twisted into a sneer, his riding outfit and curls spattered with mud. A groom with a nervous expression followed him.

“Damn fool horse,” he said, throwing his gloves to the floor.

“Y-your highness,” the groom said, crouching to pick them up. “Matilda is a spirited lass but with the right kind of patience—”

“What’s the point in having the right kind of patience when you can just buy another horse,” the prince said. “Stubborn animals like that are meant for the slaughter.”

“You can’t say that, Lyle.” Rebecca jumped from her seat and trudged toward him. “Matilda just doesn’t like you.”

“She should if she knew what was good for her,” Carlisle said, shoving my sister to the ground. “And don’t call me Lyle. That’s not a prince’s name!” He turned to Ilsa. “Get me something to eat. All that riding has worked up an appetite.”

With that, he turned and headed toward the door, completely ignoring both versions of me. That had been the way of it. To Carlisle, I wasn’t his brother but his spare. Nothing more than a tool he had no use for.

At least until the war.

“If you don’t take a break soon, you’re gonna get yourself sick.”

I looked up to discover that the room had changed. In fact, we were no longer in Rosewood Manor at all. I could tell from the dampness that permeated the air. It had been the bane of my existence for years, throwing off all my vital calculations.

How else was I to find a cure for this war?

There were two people in the room this time, myself and Ilsa, looking very different than we had just moments before. I stood, hunched over a workbench like the one in my greenhouse. No longer a child, but a man who had just passed twenty-nine years of age, my hair was overlong and pulled back from my face with a leather tie. I wore a jacket to keep off the chill. Ilsa had also aged, the gray that had once highlighted her dark Verdian hair now dominated it. Dark circles lined her sad eyes, currently focused on me.

“My brother failed to schedule in time for breaks,” I said, my voice bitter.

“Kristoff,” Ilsa said. “You’re only human. And overworking yourself like this is not healthy. You’re more likely to make a mistake.”

I tried to ignore the tremble in my hand as I poured a dark-green liquid from a large beaker to a variety of smaller ones.

“My brother also failed to schedule in mistakes,” I replied. “So that’s not an option either.”

I pivoted to where a tap had been installed, a luxury, albeit one that was infested with lead and would need—

Ilsa placed a hand on my arm. The softness of her touch stopped me in my tracks. My entire staff had been given the option to follow me here, and most had refused. I could not blame them for their decision. Who would want to move from the pleasant warmth of Rosewood Manor to a dungeon beneath the palace? My staff had cared for me since I was a boy. But, no longer being a boy, I did not require the same level of attention and care.

Out of the dozen servants that had lived at Rosewood Manor, only one had followed me here. The same one that met my eyes with sympathy as I toiled away in the palace dungeon.

“Please don’t look at me like that,” I said, dropping my gaze.

“Like what?” she asked.

“I am not deserving of your pity.” I shook her off.

“Not deserving? None of this is your fault!”

“Tell that to the wives and mothers of our soldiers. Hell, tell that to the Verdians.”

“But had it not been for your brother—”

“These were my ideas to begin with!” I snapped. “My concepts. I was the one always fiddling with spells, pushing them to extremes. Carlisle just pushed me even further. Don’t try to make me a victim in this situation, Ilsa.”

I turned the tap. It screeched to life, filling a small metal bucket.

And then the door slammed open, causing me to drop the bucket to the floor. It landed with a clang.

Blushing in shame, I looked up to the doorway above and immediately felt my heart sink. It was Carlisle. Not the young prince, but the King of Kelvia.

Or, as the Verdians had taken to calling him, The Butcher.

Our resemblance was no longer so striking. His hair was neatly trimmed, and an iron crown, the crown of war, sat nestled between his curls. He was dressed in black, supposedly in mourning for those lost, but I had never known him to comfort a war widow or speak in sympathy to his soldiers. I had always suspected that he liked the way it looked.

Ilsa immediately fell into a clumsy curtsey, which my brother ignored.

“You,” he said curtly, looking in my direction. “Do you have any results today?”

I closed my eyes, then reached down for the bucket, using those few seconds to put my thoughts into order.

“The samples needed to be brewed until The Mother’s Moon,” I began.

“Which was last night,” Carlisle interrupted. “I can keep track of something as simple as the phases of the moon.”

No, your advisors do that for you, I silently rebuked. When I spoke, my tone was far more conciliatory.

“But the actual experiments will take the next couple of days.” I filled up the bucket again. “If we’re to see the different effects of each of the compounds...”

It was likely the screech of the tap, loud enough to mask even my brother’s purposeful stride, but I didn’t realize that he had crossed the room until he was standing next to me. The shock of it was almost enough to make me drop the bucket again.

“Couple of days,” he said, his voice rising. “Since when—”

“If you would check with your advisors,” I replied, tightening my grip on the bucket. “I’m sure they would let you know of the report I sent three days ago.”

Not that you would read it.

“You know what I think?” Carlisle turned to my workbench. “I think you’re stalling again.”

“What? No!” I shuffled after him quickly, spilling the water on the stone floor. “Don’t touch—”

“You did this to me before,” he said, rustling through the different test tubes, picking up one at a time.

“Don’t!” I said, grabbing the test tube from his hand. “If you mess up the order—”

“So concerned? How do I know these are even real? They just look like colored water.”

“They’re *very* volatile, I swear. I just need time to test the stabilization—”

“Stabilization?” Carlisle turned, somehow managing to loom over me even though we were the same height. “I didn’t ask for stabilization. I asked for soldiers! The kind that will strike fear into the hearts of the Verdian army! And you’re denying me that. Well, maybe you just need a little extra motivation.”

And with that, he turned to Ilsa and reached for the knife at his belt. Her eyes went wide, and she scrambled backward.

“Wait!” I cried. “This isn’t necessary. I’m going—”

“Not necessary? I don’t know about that. It was plenty motivating when I took care of that cat of yours. Or that scullery maid. What about the woman who never left your side?”

And then, I felt it. All the fear I bottled up inside of me. Every jolt of terror I experienced at the sight of my brother. The dread that crept in at night. The frustration I felt for every one of his commands I meekly accepted. It did not matter that he was my king. That he was my brother. There was only so much one man could be pushed.

I tightened my fist around the test tube in my hand.

The noise was so slight, the cracking of glass. Usually, it would have been barely loud enough to be heard. But on that day, it seemed to echo around the room.

Carlisle turned to me, eyes wide.

“Ilsa,” I said, my voice low and angry. “Get out of—”

The transformation began instantaneously, cutting off my speech. My face lengthened, my body growing and stretching, hair sprouting out on every inch of skin. The room was filled with the popping and snapping and bones as they broke and reknit themselves. But I didn’t feel a thing, so numb was I from my rage. This man had been dictating my life for years. No, even longer than that! Keeping me a prisoner in my own home. Never allowing me a normal childhood. And for what? Carlisle Kelvin was an ineffectual king. A monster of a man.

So, what did that make me?

And what did it mean that I didn't feel a single shred of guilt as I watched myself tear him apart again?

The Manor

Kris

“Do we really need to see the rest?” Susannah asked.

I blinked and saw that the room had changed again. We were still in the castle dungeon, but very little was the same. My plants, many of which I had nurtured from seeds, now lay scattered around the room. As for The Butcher...

What remained no longer resembled a human being, never mind my identical twin.

And neither did I.

I watched as my beastly form straightened to stand, his clothing torn to the point of indecency. He looked down at his long, sharpened claws, and breathed in sharply. The memory froze in place.

“Interesting place to stop it all,” Susannah said, circling around him.

“Actually, it’s the perfect place,” I replied. “When I came to, I was shocked by the carnage, of course. But not of my own actions.”

“Tearing a man apart with your bare hands wasn’t shocking?”

“After what I had done? The lives that had been taken as a result of my magic? Not really. Killing a man with my own hands was merely an extension of that.” I stood in front of my past self, staring him straight in the face. “And once the battle rage wore off, I realized what it truly meant. That I was a monster, had been for years. Making this a fitting punishment.” I swallowed. “And then I saw what had happened to Ilsa.”

Tears streamed from my eyes, only to be quickly absorbed by my own fur. Killing my brother had meant so little, but Ilsa...

“Kris?”

The familiar voice jolted me out of my memory, transporting me from the castle dungeon back to the greenhouse. But it wasn't my surroundings that shocked me. No, it was the sight of the woman who stood in its doorway.

"Rose?" I blinked in surprise at the sight of the Verdian woman. "But you're..."

"I know," she said, hobbling toward me, leaning on the walls for support. "After last night, you probably thought that I had run away, but I talked to your sister. She explained everything."

"Ran away...My sister..." I shook my head. "No, Rose. You're supposed to be dead."

"Dead?"

My gaze drifted to Susannah, to where she lingered in the corner, flanked by the two beastly soldiers. Her eyes narrowed as they focused on Rose.

"I killed you," I said softly.

"Killed me? Oh, for goodness sake!"

And then Rose did something that shocked me. She took one of my claws in her hand and lifted it carefully, resting the pads of my paw against the side of her face.

"Does this look like dead? Does this *feel* like dead?" she asked.

I blinked. Her skin was warm beneath my own.

Before I could respond, two more figures entered the doorway, I blinked at the sight of Rebecca and Zahir, two steps behind her as always.

"Hello, Kris," my sister said. "It's been too long."

"Rebecca," I began. "What are..."

"I'm here because I need you. There's a peace treaty—"

"They're trying to take you away," Susannah said, her whisper-soft voice somehow overpowering over my sister's firm words. "I guess you can't blame them. They don't really understand. Don't know you're..."

"Cursed," I finished, then turned to Rebecca. "I can't leave. The curse..."

"Doesn't exist," Rose finished.

"What?" I turned to her. "How could you say that after everything you've seen. After this!" I gestured toward myself.

"I looked over your notes after you first transformed," Rebecca said. "The potion you doused yourself with, it was the same draught that we had been giving the soldiers. The transformation should have lasted days. A week at most. Not over a year."

“They don’t understand,” Susannah repeated, walking toward me. “They don’t know you like I do. Don’t see you for the monster you are.”

She reached out and rested a hand on my face, forcing me to look at her.

“Who are you looking at, Kris?” Rose asked.

“I...Susannah,” I said. “She’s been haunting me for the past month. Since I—”

“How can she do that if she’s not even dead?”

“Huh?” I turned back to Rose.

“I just spoke to Kal,” Rose continued. “He just received a letter from her. She’s living in the capital. Refuses to come home to her family. Not that I can blame her. But you didn’t kill her, Kris. She just got scared and ran away.”

“Enough of this,” Susannah hissed.

I could tell the moment that the spirits of the room became visible. Rose jumped, eyes widening. The sound of Zahir unsheathing his sword filled the room.

“Stay back!” He cried out as the nearest soldier charged toward my sister.

“Zahir!” Rose gasped in shock. “What—”

She was caught off guard by Susannah’s scream, turning around just in time to see the smaller woman attack. Rose stumbled backward, her musket slipping from her hands.

“What the hell?” she cursed before Susannah slapped her across the face.

What the hell, indeed? Susannah, not dead? Rose still alive? What could possibly be going on? I backed up a step, jostling my workbench. The sound of shattering glass filled the air, and I looked down to see broken test tubes and dead plants. I blinked, then looked up again.

Across the room, Zahir stabbed the soldier straight through its heart. Only instead of falling to the ground, it multiplied, three more soldiers appearing behind him in a straight row. Rebecca let out a shrill scream as the ghost of Ilsa descended upon her from behind. And across the room, Susannah pinned Rose to the ground, her delicate fingers wrapping themselves around her neck.

“Remember what you told me,” Rose said, her voice strained. “Don’t trust the magic of the manor.”

The magic of the manor. The manor!

I spun around and reached, not for the potions and plants that littered its surface, but for the workbench itself, where I had channeled charms and dark magic for years. I reached out toward it and dug my claws into its wooden surface.

It barely took any energy at all. I reached for the leftover magic and pulled as hard as I could.

And the manor obeyed.

Behind me, the trees, long dead in their pots, blossomed into long, ropey vines. They reached out and wrapped themselves around the soldiers that surrounded Zahir. I pulled again, and the doorway itself expanded then snapped shut, like a mouth opening and closing. It closed itself around Ilisa, pulling her from my sister. And on the floor, the carpet reached up and wrapped itself around Susannah, yanking her up and away from Rose.

Then everything went silent.

“I’ve been such a fool,” I murmured, removing my claws from the workbench. “After years of study, how could I forget the basic tenets.”

I turned back to Rose and reached down, offering her a hand.

“The reason magic works is that it’s part of a natural cycle. With the same ease that day moves to night, or winter to spring, magic *wants* to be used. Sometimes, it will even try to *predict* a magician’s needs. But no matter how clever magic may seem, it’s still not alive, not really.”

“So, you should never trust it,” Rose said as I helped her to her feet.

“These long months,” I said, lips twisting into a scowl. “No, an entire year. I was convinced I was cursed. Only...it wasn’t that at all.”

We both turned to Susannah, who lay pinned against the wall by the carpet.

“We heard you cry out in pain,” she said, her voice a hiss. “From miles away, we *heard* it. We saw you discover that you were a monster and deserved to suffer for your pain. All we ever wanted to do was give you what you wanted.”

As she spoke, her lips spread wider and wider until the tips of her mouth met her ears, looking as much a beast as I.

“So cruel,” Rose whispered, face crinkling in disgust.

“Cruel? What about this is cruel? We’ve watched over Kris since he was a child. Nurtured him like a parent. Doesn’t it make sense that we would want to help him when we could?”

“In what insane world is this helping!”

“Because after I killed my brother, after all of the horrors of the war, I believed I deserved this more than anything,” I replied.

“What?” Rose turned to me. “But Rebecca said that the Butcher made you serve him, that he threatened your servants!”

I shook my head.

“That’s true, but the ideas were still all mine. Every single spell. How could I have come up with them in the first place if I wasn’t a monster?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous!”

“What?” I turned to Rose.

“I haven’t spent the past month dining with a monster!” She reached out and took my sharp claws into her own soft hands. “You have shown me nothing but kindness since I arrived. Tried to warn me about the dangers. Hell, you planted seedlings for me. Would a monster do that?”

“But the war—”

“We all did things in the war that we regret, Kris.”

At the sound of Zahir’s voice, I turned toward him and my sister. The swordsman frowned, as if uncomfortable to have all the attention in the room on him.

“I’m just saying it doesn’t make you unique,” he finished, voice stiff.

“It takes more than one man, even a Butcher, to complete a war,” Rebecca said. “But we cannot hide from the results. We must accept what we have done and try and make up for it.”

“But how?”

“By coming with me,” Rebecca said.

I felt something inside of me click. For so long, I had wallowed in my own self-pity, filled with regrets for the sins I had committed. But to be able to make up for them. To put the world right...

From behind me, Susannah—or the creature that looked like Susannah—let out a low, inhuman laugh.

“You fool,” she said. “You think that I’ll just let you go. You belong here, Kristoff Kelvin. You were never meant to step foot outside of my walls. And you will stay here until the day you die.”

“Not if I have something to say about that,” Rose said, lifting the musket to her shoulder.

And with that, she aimed the gun right at Susannah’s face and pulled the trigger. The explosion that followed was deafening.

The Grave

Rose

The headstone was a small, uneven thing, probably plucked out some farmer's field. Now it sat in a clearing near the edge of the wood. A sad memorial, but at least it was something. Taking in a deep breath, I rested the musket against the stone, careful not to put any weight on my injured ankle. The name "Martin Gardner" had been written on the pale rock.

I heard someone shift a few feet behind me and felt a smile twitch on my face.

"You can come out, Kris. This isn't a solo affair," I said.

There was another rustle as Kris approached my side.

"I apologize," he said. "I've...never been to a funeral before, but I had been led to believe the mourning was something best accomplished in private."

"Parts of it are," I said. "Kinda hard not to suffer alone when grief follows you like a shadow. But we're all alone in the end, at least until the Father gathers us up for rebirth. So, it's good to spend as much of life with others as you can."

"That...hasn't been my experience."

"Oh, hell, Kris. I'm sorry. I—"

"No need to apologize."

I turned to see him standing next to me, no longer an eight-foot-tall monster, the scraggly man I had seen the night before or, hell, any of the other versions of Kris I had encountered. He had shaved and pulled back his hair in a low ponytail. He was dressed in dark clothes, perfect for a funeral, but worn for a different purpose. We were planning on leaving for the capital, after all.

His sister was still up at the manor, had been all kinds of apologetic, in fact. Apparently, it had been her folks that had made “the deal” with Garrick and the village of Farrow about a year back. At the time, it had been to have someone look after Kris while he was going through a difficult time, not to serve as a convenient space to stash away the village headman’s terrified adolescent mistress. Followed by me, of course.

It was a strange thing, getting a apology from a princess.

I looked at Kris. His blue eyes hit mine, and I felt something inside of me leap, just like when I had first met his gaze the night of the full moon. A strange, puzzling feeling.

“How is your ankle?” Kris asked.

“Fine, if I don’t put too much weight on it,” I said, nodding to the walking stick at my side.

“This doesn’t appear to be new.” He looked to the grave.

“Apparently, before Martin went off to war, he sent a letter home to his mother, figuring she might want to know that he was possibly heading off to die. And, well, let’s just say she wasn’t pleased.”

It made me think about Susannah and her parents, who considered her to be as good as dead just cause she made one decision they didn’t approve of. And that didn’t seem right. Wasn’t it better to *try* and talk it out, rather than just shut someone out of your life?

“I’m surprised your mother-in-law showed you this.”

“She didn’t. It was Kal.”

I let out a chuckle. Kal, to my shock, had been waiting outside of Rosewood Manor, all concerned about my injury. Maybe there was some hope for the future.

He took seeing his nation’s princess pretty well, all things considered.

“And now, your journey is almost complete,” Kris said, nodding toward the grave. “How does it feel?”

I shook my head. How did it feel to finally say good-bye to my Martin? He had been dead for over a year, and off at war for even longer than that. He had been out of my life for almost as long as he had been in it, and yet...

There were still times when I thought back on the warmth of his gaze, the feeling of his solid form next to me in bed each morning. He had been mine for a few short years before the war claimed him, first as a soldier, and then as a victim, but during that time, he had been the other half of my heart. And I knew I would always miss him.

Even if I didn’t think about him as much as I used to.

In response to Kris’s question, I glanced at Martin’s grave and the musket that lay across it.

“The cycle is complete,” I murmured. From birth to death, Martin was back.

“Will you return home?” Kris asked, his voice slightly strained. It took me a second to see the other questions buried beneath the first.

Will you be leaving me? Will I be alone again?

Would I?

I felt a smile tug at the corner of my lips. “To be honest, I was planning on heading to the capital first.”

Kris’s eyes widened slightly. “Oh! You’re coming. I—”

“Didn’t think you’d get rid of me that easily, did you?”

“No, I...” Kris looked up, surprised, then shook his head. “To be honest, I would really appreciate the support. My sister has promised to help guide me through the process but...”

“Negotiating peace between two nations locked in a centuries-long cycle of war and reprieve is bound to be a little complicated.”

“Especially given the negotiator.” He paused, looking out over the field in front of him. “Do you know this is the farthest I’ve gone from Rosewood Manor in my entire life? Besides the war, of course.”

And well, I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I studied Kris for a moment. There was a nervousness to his gaze that either hadn’t been there before. Or maybe it had, and his beastly face had just been too damn hard to read. But it said a lot, I think, about what the consequences of being raised in isolation really meant.

This was going to be challenging for Kris in more ways than one.

“Rebecca has promised me that it will be a short reign, at least,” he said. “All I need to do is get through the peace process, then die as a lingering consequence of my injuries.”

“Do you think you can do it?” I asked. “Be The Butcher?”

“That...No, Rose, I cannot. Which is why Rebecca is hoping to leave much of the actual negotiation up to the crown’s advisors. Given the injuries Carlisle supposedly suffered during the war, they’re hoping that people will credit that for any change in personality.”

“And then that’s it? All done? No desire to take on the throne. It is yours, technically. You even have the K name.”

Kris smiled sadly before replying. “You know, when I was a child, I asked my mother why she gave me a traditional Kelvian name for first-borns. And she told me that she wanted me to know that I

was special regardless. That even though I was not meant to be king, I was still destined for great things.”

With that, the smile fell from his lips. I’d known him long enough to understand why. He was thinking about his role in the war, about how these supposed “great things” weren’t really all that great.

“Then you’re just gonna have to come with me on my adventures.”

The words escaped my lips before I could think them through. But once they did, I could feel that I meant them in my bones. That didn’t stop Kris from turning and looking at me in shock.

“R-really?” he asked. “But I thought... What about West Ridge?”

“Well, yeah, I’ll get there eventually. But if there’s one thing that these past couple of months have taught me, it’s how small my world has been. Growing up, my entire life was contained in just a few square miles. If you had told me a year ago that I would sail across the Kelvian channel, travel with Hijanni traders, live in an enchanted manor, and meet royalty, I would have called you nuts. But now my time out in the world has taught me how little I know about it, so I’m gonna go and see more of it. Maybe the source of some of Lady Amelia’s sketches?

“And as for you, if you’re really looking to see what you’re destined for, then maybe it’s best if you start looking. Who knows, it might be in the place you least expect it. What do you say?”

With that, I stretched out my hand. For several seconds, Kris just looked at it, blinking in surprise, making me feel kinda silly.

And then he took his hand in mine.

Kelvian winters were murder, stretching long into spring. During the past several weeks, I don’t think I had been properly warm once. But all it took was a single touch of Kris’s hand, and it felt like the sun shining on a spring day.

“I would be honored to travel with you, Rose Gardner,” he said, raising my hand and brushing the back of it with his lips.

And then he looked up, his blue eyes met mine, and I felt a lot more than “warm.”

“Well,” I replied, surprised to find my voice slightly breathless. “Time to start a new cycle.”

And with that, we turned away from the musket and the false grave. And for a moment, when I looked back to that gathering of trees, I thought I saw someone, a tall man between the shadows, standing alone, one hand raised as if in farewell.

“Good-bye, Martin,” I said under my breath, as Kris and I headed in the direction of the rising sun.

Acknowledgments

Thank you so much for reading *The Rose and the Claw*. If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review to help spread the word. While Rose and Kris may have found their happily ever after, the series is just beginning! Next up, Rebecca and Zahir will be taking center stage in *A Dance with Magic*, which retells the “Twelve Dancing Princesses,” one of my personal favorite fairy tales. I’ve included the first chapter of *A Dance with Magic* at the end of this book if you’d like to try it out. [You can preorder the novella today.](#)

Welcome to the Twin Kingdoms! I hope you’ll consider sticking around.

I’d also like to thank the people who helped to bring this story to the next level. This includes my beta readers Laura Massey, Jenn Gott, Joanna Cross, and April Alvis. Also, thank you (as always!) to my copyeditor Suzanne Johnson for fixing all of my silly mistakes.

If you’d like to learn more about my books and other projects, you can always [join my newsletter](#).

A Dance with Magic

Chapter 1 The Window

Rebecca

I could see freedom from my bedroom window.

A lush green field, illuminated by the pale dawn light, lined the back of the palace. Someone had opened the stable doors, allowing the horses to run free. For a moment, I found my gaze lingering on a single mare, a beautiful creature the palest of grays, racing through the grass. I felt the tightness in my chest relax a fraction.

And then I heard a shift behind me.

“Oh dear,” I said, a smile twitching on my lips. “Don’t tell me my time is already up?”

I turned around to see a tall young man with the trademark Hijanni coloring—light-brown skin, straight, dark hair, and golden, hawk-like eyes. He wore the bright red uniform of a soldier. All the guards did, even with the war long over. But unlike the others, he wasn’t armed with a musket, but a sword.

Anyone who would interpret this as a weakness didn’t know Zahir.

“Lord Reginald is on his way,” he began, then paused, as if picking up on the subtle shift in my mood. “But...you do have ten minutes.”

“Oh?” My eyebrows rose. “And what could I do with that ten minutes?”

“I suppose that’s plenty of time to sneak down to the stables.”

Well, well. Imagine that. The famously rule-abiding Zahir suggesting escape? Perhaps anything really was possible.

“I’m just saying,” he continued, voice stiff. “Dove looks like she would appreciate a ride.”

“And wouldn’t it be a crime to deny her such a simple wish? Should we sneak down the back stairs?”

“Better to go toward the servant’s quarters. I—”

He was cut off by a knock at my chamber door. At the sharp rap, annoyance flashed through his golden eyes. His jaw clenched as he turned to the door.

So much for ten minutes.

The moment he turned from me, I felt the mask slip back on, straightening my posture and smoothing the smile from my face. It was one thing to relax around one's personal guard, but the rest of the world expected something more. Not Rebecca Kelvin, but a symbol.

I was well known throughout the kingdom for my appearance, as immodest as that sounds. Like my mother before me, I fit the standards of the classic Kelvian beauty. Not just in my fair skin, blue eyes, long, pale-blond hair, and slight stature, but also in my stillness and silence. Kelvian women were supposed to be small, unobtrusive. As my nation's princess, I had embodied that perfectly.

Only I wasn't a princess anymore.

Zahir opened my chamber door. "You're early."

If it wasn't for my careful schooling, I would have winced at his choice of words and tone of voice. I suppose it was unfair to criticize my guard for being *overprotective*, but...

"Well, I never! Can't it kill you to be a little more polite, swordsman?"

The speaker was my lady's maid, Maggie Carroll, a plump woman of middle age, currently weighed down with a variety of hair ribbons. She glared at Zahir as she passed.

"Now, now, Maggie. Zahir is just doing his job." The second arrival bowed in my direction as he entered, the light in the room catching on his steel-gray hair and curling beard.

"Your Highness," he said with a slight bow.

"Lord Reginald," I replied.

Like myself, they both wore dark colors, a sign of mourning for my brother the king, who had, as far as the world knew, "died" a month before.

Of course, only a select few, including the people in this room, knew that Carlisle the Butcher had been buried in the ground over a year ago.

"I don't see why being rude falls into his job description," Maggie replied. "And me with so little time on my hands! Only an hour to prepare the princess for her meeting with the Verdian diplomat. Imagine that!"

"Queen," Zahir muttered beneath his breath.

"I'm sure you can muster up something suitable," Lord Reginald replied.

Maggie stiffened. "I beg your pardon? What do you know about—"

"Do you have any questions, my dear?" Lord Reginald ignored her protests. His gaze softened as his eyes met mine. "I know this is an important meeting."

"I was able to gain that much from the dossier you sent over. It was extensive," I replied.

“Good. I just want to make sure you understand the gravity of the situation.”

“Given that this visit is to decide not only the future between our two nations but my marital state, I would say that I understand it quite well.”

Next to me, my maid let out a sigh so heavy it seemed to fill the room.

“It’s a shame,” she said, holding a deep navy hair ribbon to my face. “For a woman to have to make *such* a determination on her own. In my day, that would have been the job of the *men* in the family.”

I pressed my lips together in a firm line. Maggie was technically right, but the war had derailed everything. And my future had been far from my brother’s most significant concern.

“With the crown at stake, the princess’s marriage is even more vital than it once was,” Lord Reginald replied. “This is not a decision that we can make lightly.”

“Queen.” This time Zahir spoke louder. “Not princess. And it seems to me as if the *crown* is in awful good hands.”

“A truth which I do not deny.” Lord Reginald raised a hand. “I understand that without Her Majesty’s efforts, we could still be at war. Just what I’d expect from a daughter of King Conrad, of course.” He bowed toward me before continuing. “But that doesn’t change the fact that with a woman on the throne, other nations will view us as weak. Verdia and the Eastern Empire will be quick to take advantage of what they perceive to be a fragile opponent. Even Hijan may offer us less-favorable trade deals.”

He looked to Zahir as he said this, and I watched as my guard crossed his arms over his chest in apparent frustration. It was clear where this argument was going.

Meaning it was past time for me to jump in.

“While I appreciate your council, Lord Reginald, the diplomat’s visit is to discuss the *possibility* of marriage, nothing more. Regardless of the outcome, the crown will remain in my fragile female hands.”

Lord Reginald spoke up. “I did not mean to imply—”

“Of course not. And while I am certainly open to the benefits that a more friendly relationship between our two nations would provide, I am also aware of the will of the people. Until recently, our nations were at war, and we have been enemies for centuries before that. A decision to put a lesser Verdian prince on the throne is likely to be strikingly unpopular. And if I don’t have the support of my people, how can I call myself their queen?”

“I...well-stated, of course.”

But I could see the doubt in my advisor's eyes.

Reginald Gallant had been an advisor for longer than I had been queen. In fact, he had been serving the Kelvian family for longer than my own twenty-six years. His temperament was steady, his instincts usually good, but he was still a man with biases. For better or worse, our nation had maintained a constant masculine presence on the throne for over four hundred years. My advisor could not comprehend how it would function without one.

I suspected it was keeping him up at night.

I took a step forward, resting one of my small hands on his gloved one.

"My Lord, I thank you for your concerns, and your detailed notes have been a great help. But this morning, we will just be greeting the diplomat, an event that will likely take mere minutes. Any true discussion will begin over dinner tonight. Perhaps we should have a more in-depth preparation this afternoon. After all." I cast a glance at my maid. "That is a fair amount of hair ribbons. I suspect it will take the whole of the hour just to examine them all."

Lord Reginald hesitated, then nodded. "Of course. Better to thoroughly work on the issue later, than to rush into it now. I will leave you to your preparations, my dear."

And with that, he bowed and stepped out of the room.

The second the door shut behind him, Maggie let out a huff.

"Would be wise, indeed," she said. "What would be wiser is if he chose to have this discussion in a sitting room, as is proper, rather than the princess's bedchamber."

"Queen," Zahir corrected once more.

"Oh, don't you—"

"Lord Reginald," I said, pitching my voice slightly louder to gain Maggie's attention. The fact that she fell silent meant that the crown at least pulled *some* weight against the indomitable will of Maggie Carroll.

"Lord Reginald doesn't mean anything improper by it," I continued, speaking in normal tones. "It's just hard for him to forget that I am no longer the child he once dangled on his knee, but a woman grown."

"Well," Maggie replied. "In my day, no man would be allowed such access, regardless of the reason."

Cycles! It was impossible to miss the look she cast Zahir as she said this. He glared back. Would the two of them ever get along?

"Perhaps it would be wise for you to step outside for now," I said, turning to Zahir.

He opened his mouth as if in protest.

“What?” I asked. “Do I need to worry about her deadly collection of hair ribbons?”

Zahir scowled. “They would make very effective strangling devices.”

“Then I will be sure to advise her to keep them far from my neck.” A smile quirked onto my lips.

“Do you seriously think I need to fear my maid, Zahir?”

His shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. “Of course not, my queen.” He cast a glance in her direction. “I know exactly what she is capable of, after all.”

“Go,” I said before Maggie could respond.

Zahir nodded. “I will wait outside the door.”

I bid my guard farewell and turned back to Maggie and all her hair ribbons, preparing for a day that I knew very well may change my life.

And all of Kelvia with it.

Also by Nancy O'Toole

The Red and Black series

Red and Black (Book 1)

Black and Blue (Book 2)

Riley's Story (Book 2.5. [Free to all mailing list subscribers](#))

Silver and Gold (Book 3)

Past and Future (Book 4)

The Twin Kingdoms

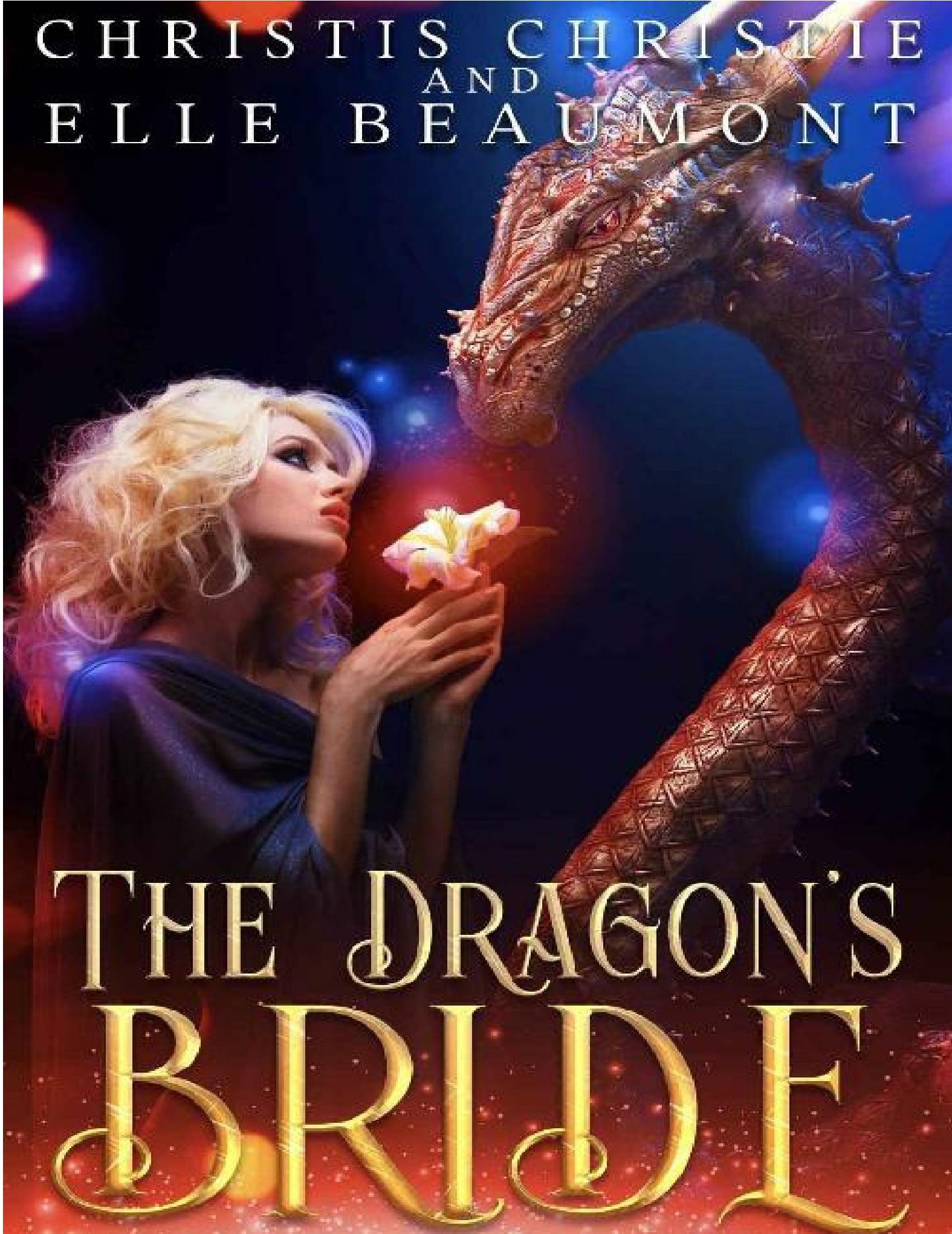
The Rose and the Claw (Book 1)

A Dance with Magic (Book 2)

The Lady of the Watchtower: Six Stories of Magic and Transformation

More by Midnight Tide Publishing

CHRISTIS CHRISTIE
AND
ELLE BEAUMONT



***The Dragon Bride* by Christis Christie and Elle Beaumont**

Twisted mages, dragons, and a sacrificial bride to save the land.

Every year, the villagers of Omdahl pay tribute to their Dragon Master by gifting him with food and jewels for his protection against outside forces. For centuries, this exchange has taken place. This year, the neighboring radical mages have grown agitated, and have attacked the villagers. If matters weren't already dire, the land is steadily dying, and becoming uninhabitable. When the attacks grow more violent, the Elders of Omdahl agree, the tithe for the Dragon Master will be a bride.

Imara always knew she was different, and the village never ceased to remind her. Unable to conjure magic like her fellow seidr's, she's a pariah. But when the opportunity to save her homeland arises, she knows what she must do—even if it means becoming the Dragon Master's bride.

Now, to protect all she loves, Imara must work alongside the Dragon Master, or they risk losing everything.

[Buy The Dragon Bride today](#)